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“Fer I say it ag’in, this ain’t no place fer ye!”

(page 218.)

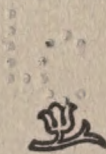
THE AUTO BOYS' OUTING

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"THE AUTO BOYS," "FAR PAST THE FRONTIER,"
"CONNECTICUT BOYS IN THE WESTERN
RESERVE," "THE TRAIL OF THE
SENECA," "CAPTIVES
THREE," Etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY ARTHUR DeBEBIAN

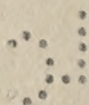


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CHAPTER I

ON THE EVE OF DEPARTURE

“Just imagine the moon shining in through the windows and not a curtain,—not even an old rag to keep it out! And there we are asleep on the floor of that empty house. Then away in the night when the wind moans mournful and solemn, suddenly a board creaks upstairs just like footsteps on the bare floor. Then all is still again and everything pitch dark, except just the one streak where the moon shines in.”

Billy Worth drew up his shoulders almost to his ears, wound his arms about himself and went through all the motions of a frightened shudder in contemplation of the weird picture his words presented.

“Oh fudge! You can’t scare me for sour apples, Billy,” came from Dave MacLester, “but I wish you wouldn’t make up any more of

that kind of talk. Let's think of the good, bright blaze in the old fireplace and—and something pleasant," he added protestingly.

"Sure!" chipped in Paul Jones, in that shrill, brisk voice of his, so entirely his own there never was any mistaking him.

"Sure!" said Paul, "let's talk about how away up in that old, dark attic where never a living thing but spiders and cobwebs and maybe spooks an' goblins has been all these years—there lies tonight—lies right there in the dark and the dust—Grandfather Beaman's wooden leg and the strange marks on it that nobody could ever make out."

Dave let go no very gentle drive with his open hand toward Jones' head, but the timely ducking of that member by its alert young owner caused MacLester only to fan the air.

"Say, when you four-year-olds get through with your kindergarten, we'll talk business," admonished Phil Way, with rather more of sarcasm than he usually displayed. "But, Dave, the more you show that such talk makes

you fidget, the more you'll hear of it. Now, let's get serious. Did anybody get that map George Wilder said he'd have for us?"

"In my jeans this very minute," spoke up Billy Worth.

"And there's a tip-top grocery at Middle Run and that's only about two miles away," put in Paul Jones, with sudden enthusiasm. "I was going to mention it before. Mr. Wilder has been up that way and he told me an' Bill about it."

" 'Me an' Bill,' " jeered Dave MacLester good-naturedly, but most tauntingly.

"Oh, go on, you! *You* aren't no grammarian!"

The care with which Mr. Jones said "aren't" in this sentence made the blunder in its construction all the funnier. Little he minded the laugh given him, though. He had feelings, but friends could not offend. Yet let an enemy scoff and—well, there'd be danger of a scrimmage though the offending party were twice his size.

But now again Phil Way brought the conversation back to the real business of the outing the four young friends had in prospect. "How about fishing tackle?" he inquired. "That hasn't been checked off the list in any way, so far."

"Going to see about it the first thing in the morning," declared Dave. "I thought we had enough at the cave but the snags in the old creek have finally got the most of it. I'll get plenty in the morning, so check that off as done."

"Not for a minute," came from Phil with emphasis. "We'll not check even that frowsy old hammock that Jones insists on, and that I wish to goodness he'd forget, till he says it's ready to be loaded in."

Then, item after item, Way called out and each was found to have been provided.

"Gee Whiz! we'll have enough stuff to just about furnish that old house!" ejaculated Paul Jones; and to almost anyone it would appear that he was right. Indeed, just how all the provisions, cooking utensils, bedding, personal bag-

gage and a score or more of various individual items were going to be carried in an ordinary touring car, together with four passengers, looked like a very large problem.

Some such thought came to Dave MacLester, perhaps, for "A perfect stack of stuff we'll never need!" he growled. "We'll take a cart-load of fishing tackle and never catch one single, solitary, little shiner. We'll take two or three bats and a half-dozen balls and never so much as play ante-over!" But there was a trifle more than a streak of pessimism in Dave's make-up and his comments were so often of indigo blue that friends were not disturbed.

The chums were neither worried nor alarmed on this occasion, at least. Far from it. Their pleasurable anticipations ran too high to permit of being chilled by a couple of discouraging predictions. A long-looked-for and well-deserved vacation was just at hand. An outing which promised worlds of fun and much of serious interest was in prospect and following, as it did, a season of good, earnest work which had

earned for the four friends a first-class automobile, fully paid for and all their own, their hearts were buoyant indeed as they completed their preparations.

The silvery moonlight of an early August evening shone tranquilly down as the boys discussed their plans. Phil and Dave sat in a lawn swing where the rays from a lamp in Dr. Way's window enabled the former to read his itemized list of their traveling and other requirements. On Phil's right, Billy Worth, with his arms hugging his knees, was seated on the ground, while Paul Jones sprawled at full length on the left, his eyes turning lazily skyward.

It was Monday night and the last the lads would have at home for almost a month. Their two-days' journey overland was to have its beginning at ten o'clock the following morning. Even now the thirty horse-power car was for the most part loaded and ready in the green and yellow shed the friends called their garage.

Under some large, old elms this bright, little building stood in the back yard of the Way

residence. It was the home and shelter of the automobile and more. There was a business-like looking desk in one corner, also account books and papers and furniture which, altogether, gave unmistakable evidence of some kind of an office.

There was a work-bench, with no small array of tools upon it, along one wall. Of the half-dozen electric bulbs within the shed, one was lighted and over and over again its brightness was reflected in the brightly polished lamps and brass work of the car.

From the little garage to where its youthful owners were seated was but a stone's throw. The only wonder was that the boys were even thus far away. All summer long, when not at work or out with the machine itself, they had lingered fondly about the green and yellow shed and the precious thing of power and beauty that it housed.

And now for whole days together the chums were to know no separation from their auto nor from each other. Blessed days and all that they

had in store! What adventure, what danger and what discoveries the next few weeks were to bring forth not Phil nor Billy Worth nor Dave nor Paul suspected or foresaw for a single moment. And it was surely much better so.

To begin with, a somewhat unusual place had been chosen for the outing. Not to a crowded resort of the seaside or the mountains were the boys going; not to a wilderness far from civilization, automobile supplies and other comforts were their thoughts turning, but to a deserted and empty old farmhouse standing amidst neglected surroundings, and at its back a weed-grown garden sloping down to a gently flowing river.

The latter, with its splendid opportunities for fishing and for swimming, was surely an attraction, but not the only thing which drew the Auto Boys. Nor were the grassy banks, cool and inviting, where the broad stream skirted an old, old, apple orchard, the magnet. It was the ancient house, weather-beaten, gloomy and

silent, which probably held the foremost place in the lads' minds.

Still, it was quite by chance the chums had chosen the spot described as the scene of their vacation. The old house, years before, had been the home of Paul's grandfather. It was this that brought the place to the boys' knowledge and also made it available for their purpose. The distance from Lannington, their home, was sufficient to make the automobile journey of satisfactory length, yet not great enough to cause the trip to be expensive.

The empty dwelling, gloomy and forbidding as it appeared to passersby, held for the lads, in addition to the shelter it would provide, an air of mystery and romance, so often clinging to houses once bright with lights and gay with laughter, but long since left empty and alone. The old barn upon the premises, gray and storm-beaten, would furnish a roof, though undoubtedly a leaky one, for their car.

Summing up these attractions, together with those of the river, there were included, of

course, the delights of the country generally with its outdoor life of many kinds, and miles and miles of roads, and little towns and villages,—all fertile territory for interesting trips of exploring in the automobile.

The bit of family tradition in connection with the old home to which Paul Jones alluded in his teasing words to Dave MacLester—Grandfather Beaman's wooden leg, and the strange marks upon it, the meaning of which nobody could ever make out,—was often a subject of conversation among the young friends. They had heard the story time and again, both before and after having chosen the abandoned dwelling for their outing. That some possible discovery in regard to this matter was one of the things to which they looked forward, however, is quite improbable. Nor would it be too much, I believe, to say they had no thought of such a thing.

Interested the boys naturally were to inspect the curious figures the old gentleman burned upon the wood which had taken the place of the good, right, lower limb he left on the field of

battle; but they had no expectation of being able to decipher their significance. Tradition said many had tried to do so, but in vain. Perhaps the crude characters had no particular meaning. No one knew.

Mr. Beaman's mind had not been strong in his later years. A number of things gave evidence of this. Land that it was supposed he owned was found, after he died, to belong to others. Papers which he had been supposed to have were never found at all.

The uncommunicative, suspicious ways the old gentleman had had for some years leading up to the time of his death were now considered, also, to be due to a more or less shattered mental condition. Thus he had, people said, idly burned meaningless figures upon his wooden leg just as he made wholly unnecessary and useless boxes and bins in the barn; just as he built needless walls, and posts and various objects in cement and wood about the dooryard of the rambling old-fashioned house.

Paul Jones, not overly delicate in his conver-

sation at any time, declared that his grandfather was surely "daffy," whatever that may be. In this not very respectful opinion he was supported to some extent openly, and to a large extent secretly, by John Wilby, the husband of Paul's sister and only relative.

Mrs. Wilby, on the other hand, was doubtful. Often she came out boldly and said Grandfather Beaman had been imposed upon and abused in life because he was just the least bit queer and too generous for his own good; and she, for one, would never believe, now that he was gone and could say never a word in explanation of what was not understood, that he was ever anything but a mild-mannered, quiet, honest man; that he was just as sensible as any who ever questioned his conduct, and she didn't know but a great deal more so.

However, whether the poor gentleman was possessed of perfect faculties or not concerned the Auto Boys not at all. If asked to express themselves upon the subject they would probably have agreed with Paul. As they were not

asked, and as no one so much as hinted that the old house, which would be their home for a considerable period, was anything more than just such an empty, abandoned dwelling as one might see along almost any country road, they little expected that Grandfather Beaman would be a figure of any note in their outing. Indeed, no one would have been more surprised than they had the curtain of the future been lifted before them as they sat there in the moonlight talking of the days to come.

CHAPTER II

ON THE ROAD

“Well, we’ve just got to leave something out!”

The speaker was Billy Worth. He stood with Phil Way, Dave MacLester and Paul Jones beside the automobile loaded and ready for their vacation tour and outing.

Plainly, the car would be somewhat more than comfortably filled by the time its four young owners were aboard. By means of baggage straps a great bale of bedding and blankets was attached to a rack on the rear of the tonneau. On the running boards various tools, including spade, ax, coil of rope, hatchets, fishing poles, lanterns, a small gasoline stove, and two suit cases of baggage, to say nothing of a couple of spare tires, were securely strapped.

In the tonneau were boxes and baskets of provisions, cups, plates and other dishes, a kettle

or two, a frying pan, a coffee pot and four folding camp stools. In front of the seat beside the driver,—who seemed likely, by the way, to be the only one who would have a reasonable amount of space for the disposition of either limbs or body—was a soap box. This contained more household necessities such as soap, matches, clothesline, a wash basin and a scrubbing brush.

Plainly, as has been said, the auto was pretty completely loaded.

“I say something or other’s got to be left behind,” declared Billy Worth again.

“Leave that measly hammock,” suggested Dave MacLester.

“We shall not! Throw out a few of those old stew pans and things,” Paul ejaculated forcefully.

“I tell you, fellows,” said Phil Way, “a lot of this personal baggage won’t be needed. If anybody gets his shirt torn and *has* to change, or anything like that, let him borrow. There’s

no sense in each man of us having a whole outfit. This is no race to Paris!"

Phil's suggestions were usually adopted, and usually they disposed of all arguments; but not so in this instance.

"What's all this *soap* for?" demanded Paul Jones, delving into the box in front. "Two, four, six! Six bars of soap! I'd like to know who's going to use it?"

"Not *you*, I bet," Dave chipped in with sarcasm.

"Well, I should hope *not*!" was the lively rejoinder. "And a scrubbin' brush! Great balls of wax!" continued Mr. Jones with more fervor than elegance, "what *do* some of you fellows think this is? A pink tea?"

"Well, Paul's about right, at that," broke in Billy Worth. "What's the use of lugging along an old scrub brush?"

"Hush up, you two, will you?" demanded Phil Way. "Dave's sister put that brush in along with the matches. What's the harm in taking it?"

“Say, give me that *brush!* Give it here!” exclaimed MacLester suddenly. In another moment he had deposited the offending article in a corner of the little garage, in about such a manner as he would have sent a flat stone skipping over the water at Star Lake. “That’s one of her *jokes,*” said he, with a grin, evidently referring to his sister. “*I* didn’t know she sent the thing along. And all that soap, when one cake would do! That’s her joke, too. But we can melt the soap and make grease for the car if we’d *have* to. It ain’t like it was no good for *anything!*”

“Well, that’s so, and I reckon we can take everything we’ve got *now,*” chirped Paul in his shrill, lively way, and the others assented.

The removal of the brush had reduced the load of the car by at least four ounces; because it was a good, large business-like sort of a brush to begin with, and well calculated to convey the substantial hint Dave’s sister seemed to have intended. There was no gain in space by this tremendous reduction in the car’s load, however.

The box in front occupied just as much room as before.

Yet, perhaps the principal profit in the throwing out of the brush was *not* in the lessened weight to be carried; no, not at all. It was in the final settlement of the troublesome proposition that *something* must be left behind.

Not that the Auto Boys were in danger of quarreling over the subject, much as their language might have indicated such a situation to the casual listener. Never that. Their style of conversation was quite likely to be of the give-and-take variety. Quick brains and sharp tongues were often responsible for words that, under other circumstances, would have wounded deeply; but the perfect friendship cementing this quartet of young Americans took the sting from the most caustic expressions of its members, when used among themselves, at least.

“Nine o’clock,” announced Phil, coming from the house, whither he had run for a moment, “and now everybody better skip along and get his parting tears shed so’s to be all ready at

exactly ten. If you insist on leaving your hammock behind, Paul, now's your chance to lug it home and put it where 'twill be real safe."

Phil did not often indulge in irony and Dave and Billy both laughed at this last shot at the faded, dilapidated contraption Paul was bent on taking with him.

"I'd take that blessed old hammock along now, by Jimminy, if it didn't leave room for anything else. Honest Injun, I just *would*," Jones declared with a resolute grin. "And I only hope I won't have to fight to get into it a decent share of the time."

With a parting sally to the effect that the possessor of the article in question should by no means suffer any loss of sleep, lest anybody might wish to deprive him of that property, the chums separated.

On their good-byes to the home folks they were leaving there is no need to dwell. They were a good, average lot of well-grown boys. If their voices were subdued, their hearts softened, and their more tender feelings stirred as, each

with his own dear ones,—mother, sister, father, brother,—they exchanged farewells, as I hope and believe was the case, it is entirely to their credit.

But now the car is under way and a sight worth walking many a block to see, it surely is. Billy Worth is at the wheel, his practiced eye scanning the pavement and his steady hand keeping the wheels always in the best course. Billy is a black-haired, bulky, but strong and alert chap of nearly fifteen years. Dave MacLester, considerably larger, a little older, and a rather serious and not very optimistic young fellow—still, a good companion, always—sits beside him.

In the tonneau are Phil and Paul. The former's legs are much too long for the space available for their disposal, for, as has been seen, the auto is well laden. By keeping one foot on the seat and another braced against a rope binding the baggage down, however, Phil makes himself comfortable. His position is not dignified, but he doesn't worry on that score. At

least his bright, clean-cut face wears a very cheerful expression neath the visor of his motor cap. His age is not yet a month past fifteen.

With cap pulled rakishly low on one side, his slender, wiry figure doubled up like a jackknife as he sinks into a corner of the deep, wide seat beside Phil, Paul Jones contemplates the days of play in store and unconsciously smiles broadly. He has a pleasing, rather innocent expression; but back of those blue eyes and under that sandy hair, in no danger of injury from too much brushing, there is a mind which should cause no one to take his look of artlessness too seriously. The youngest of all is Paul, but he is certainly not the most backward on this or any other account; nor the least courageous or jolly.

“Say! There’s Sam Carew! He’s a fine young squash! Where do you s’pose *he’s* going?”

This exclamation came from Paul as he caught sight of a young gentleman of about fifteen years, suit case in hand, turning into a side

street toward the Union station. The automobile was bowling along merrily and those on the front seat did not hear.

"Sam's kept himself pretty quiet, lately," Phil Way observed. "It's 'most too bad."

Paul Jones' uncomplimentary comment with regard to Mr. Samuel Carew, Jr., as well as Phil Way's more kindly answer, those of you who have read "The Auto Boys," the first of this series, will quickly understand.

Sam Carew it was who played spy for the Star Lake Club. He it was, also, who carried out for them the plan of humiliating the Auto Boys, in connection with the tragedy of that lonely road where Huckster Binski lived. You will recall how, indirectly, this very act proved a boomerang and led to the disgrace and undoing of the Star Lake fellows.

Well might Sam Carew, as Phil remarked, keep himself "quiet." Yet he was not a half bad sort of fellow, but for his silly habit of bragging and his too active imagination, before he fell in with the Star Lake cousins. Very

foolishly he had permitted them to make a cats-paw of him, and following their well-deserved downfall he had scarcely a friend remaining. Fred Perth and other former associates had given him the cold shoulder in no uncertain way after his desertion of them for the gay company at the Lake; and now Sam had ample time to ponder over his silly actions and their unhappy consequences.

Just how Carew would appear in future as a result of the early summer's experiences was a subject to which Phil Way gave his thoughts while the auto sped smoothly over the familiar west road. And he made up his mind then and there that if Sam showed by his bearing that he wanted to let by-gones be by-gones, make amends and a fresh start, he was entitled to a "square deal" and ought to have it—ought to have the good will of the Auto Boys, even, and should have it, too, if he, Phil, could help.

With his thoughts in lines of which the foregoing is the substance, Phil sought to find how Paul Jones would regard the idea. "Sam will

be a better fellow since he's found it doesn't pay to get everybody down on him," he said.

"Sam Carew's going to Middle Run to stay till school begins," called Billy Worth over his shoulder, at the same moment. "Some of his folks told Dave's sister."

"Just talking about him. Saw him with a suit case going to the station," Phil called above the noisy rush of the wind, for Billy was making the speedometer register thirty an hour on a good stretch of straight away. "Why, say, we won't be but a little way from Middle Run! I didn't know *he* was going there," Way added.

"Going to stay with a chap named Joe Kalie. They used to live neighbors, somewhere, before Sam's folks came to Lannington," Dave Mac-Lester announced.

"We've got to treat Sam white, fellows, if he wants to meet us anywhere near half way. That is, if we should see him over there, or if we don't see him till school starts. He's had about grief enough!"

“He’ll have to come across good an’ plenty, then!” piped Paul Jones.

Whether Sam did “come across,” if by that phrase it may be understood that Paul meant that he must show a disposition to make himself agreeable, or whether he did not “come across,” will be apparent in due season. The point to which attention is called at this time is that the Auto Boys were big enough and broad enough to give him a fair chance, if they found him at all disposed to change the tactics which had brought him only suffering and humiliation.

Lannington had been left forty miles behind, according to one guide post, and thirty-two miles, if certain others were to be believed,—for these, like other signs, are not always infallible—when the Auto Boys paused for a noon-day lunch at the roadside. They had not been successful in finding a thoroughly desirable spot, and the one finally chosen was beneath a large oak where apparently someone else had made camp quite recently.

There were the ashes of a small fire, and the

tall grass, gray with the dust from the highway, was trampled to the ground. A number of broken and empty egg-shells and cobs and charred husks of green corn scattered about gave evidence that the spot had lately been a meal-time stopping place of other travelers.

Phil and Dave promptly marched off with a bucket to bring fresh water from a farmhouse a quarter-mile farther on along the road. Billy and Paul busied themselves kindling a fire to make coffee. Then, while they still waited, a basket of sandwiches, pickles, pie and cheese, provided expressly for lunches *en route*, was opened and made ready for a most enthusiastic—not to say violent—attack upon its contents.

The two were thus occupied when they suddenly discovered themselves observed. Peeping through the space between the steering wheel and the driver's seat, from the opposite side of the car, was a pair of questioning brown eyes. They belonged to a very young person, evidently, and when they discovered two other

pair of optics looking toward them, that is to say, Billy Worth's and Paul Jones' eyes, they disappeared instantly.

"Hi, there! What do *you* want?" Billy sang out good-humoredly. It was no new experience to find youngsters, and even grown people, gratifying their curiosity about the automobile, particularly in the country.

Paul Jones, on the other hand, ran quickly around the machine to get a better look at the young stranger. To his surprise and astonishment he found no one there. In amazed tones he imparted this information to his companion, and Billy, with equal surprise, joined in a search.

Could it be possible that the young creature had somehow leaped the fence into the field of full-grown corn alongside? As presently the two boys went in that direction to look for tracks or other clues they were attracted by a skurry in the tall grass and weeds among which the car stood. Out from under the machine there crept with wonderful agility the odd little

stranger. Like a flash he was on his feet and darting down the road in the direction from which the automobile had come.

The two boys laughed in whole-souled merriment at the seemingly silly fright of the little chap; for a good look as he emerged from his hiding showed him to be very dirty and unkempt youngster of not more than eleven years. No doubt he belonged to one of the farmhouses of the neighborhood and, drawn by unbridled curiosity, had crept up to get a close inspection of the wonders of the "Thirty" while the owners' backs were turned.

Dave and Phil joined in the laugh, too, when told of the incident, and the joke helped make the roadside dinner very enjoyable, despite MacLester's solemn prediction that they would run entirely out of provisions within three days. However, there was consternation and to spare a trifle later. Paul made the find.

"Where's our license tag?" he almost yelled. "We've lost our number plate, that's what we have!"

CHAPTER III

A MYSTERIOUS YOUNG PERSON

Young Mr. William Worth expressed the profound conviction that he would be "flabbergasted." Mr. David McLeod MacLester was of the opinion that the outing was destined to be accompanied by constant misfortunes, anyway; and to this effect, if not in just these words, declared his sentiments.

"No use fussing about it. The thing's a goner and no amount of talk is going to bring it back." This from Captain Philip Way seemed to state the situation quite correctly.

Certain it is, the license number, hung on the rear of the car, had disappeared. Certain it is, also, that there was no prospect of anything being gained thereby though Paul Jones added, "It does beat thunder!" to the strong expressions of which Dave and Billy had already delivered themselves.

The strangest fact was that the buckles of the straps by which the plate was secured had been opened. The fastenings had not been broken. Clearly, then, the tag had not fallen of its own weight but had been removed by someone. How else could the straps have been undone?

Phil Way recalled positively that the number was on the car when he and Billy had washed the machine, preparatory to their trip, the day before. He was equally positive the tag had not been taken off by them for polishing or for any purpose, as Dave MacLester suggested.

And as Billy Worth was able to confirm all that Phil said, the only conclusion to be reached was that the plate had been stolen before the car left Lannington. There had been no stop of any consequence along the way—no opportunity at any time for thief or meddler to act, from the time the machine was backed out of the little green and yellow garage at home.

But as Phil suggested, and as he succeeded at last in making the others understand, nothing

could be done but admit the loss and determine what should be done about it. The latter was the important thing. To continue on without a license tag meant danger of arrest at the first village or at the hands of some country constable. To return to Lannington meant the loss of a whole day's time.

"It's only about four miles to Thomasboro," said Phil, studying the road map. "'Tisn't much of a burg but if there's any kind of a garage there at all, we may be able to borrow a tag. Or, I'll tell you what!" he exclaimed, happily, "we'll get Knight & Wilder on the long distance 'phone, and have them loan us a number from one of their demonstrators or somewhere. They can send it up on the evening train and we'll lay up at Thomasboro till it comes."

This proposition met with approval at once; but a suggestion from Dave MacLester, the next moment, that whoever had taken the missing tag would not stop with that, but use it in some way to make its real owners trouble, caused a feeling of unpleasant apprehension. In short,

the incident put upon the spirits of all the lads a damper that assuredly did not promise well for the pleasure of this trip to which all had so eagerly looked forward.

“You see, somebody could put our number on his car, then do something against the law, and get away. We’d get hauled up for it, because the license register would show that No. 6444 is ours,” MacLester persisted. He had said the same thing in as many different ways a half dozen times before and in a most doleful manner always.

Nevertheless, Captain Phil’s proposal in regard to a way out of the difficulty found general favor, as it also did him credit. It showed there was gray matter under that motor cap of his, and that he knew the purpose of it. He knew how to use his head, in other words, an accomplishment just as much worth while in play as it is in work. And now, when he said, “We’ll have to move to reach Thomasboro in time to have George Knight get a new plate on that train,” all four boys eagerly prepared to start.

"Gee, Dave, this car's got load enough without that case of dumps of yours. Chuck 'em out!" said Paul Jones cheerily, climbing into the tonneau, whither MacLester had preceded him, still predicting trouble.

Billy Worth was cranking the motor and in another moment the Thirty, as the machine was named, would have been in motion; but as he straightened up, he caught sight of an object a little way down the road that caused his mouth to open in astonishment. The others, seeing his wondering look, turned quickly about and all beheld a slim, and not very long, little figure running toward them, frantically waving above his head the missing license tag.

"Say, you're the fine, young lad!" called Jones, gleefully, over the back of the tonneau, as he recognized the plate. "Did ye find it in the road?" he asked, smiling joyfully, as the diminutive stranger came up close.

"I get lo. I get you lolt it," the youngster answered.

"You *what?*" demanded Paul, laughing.

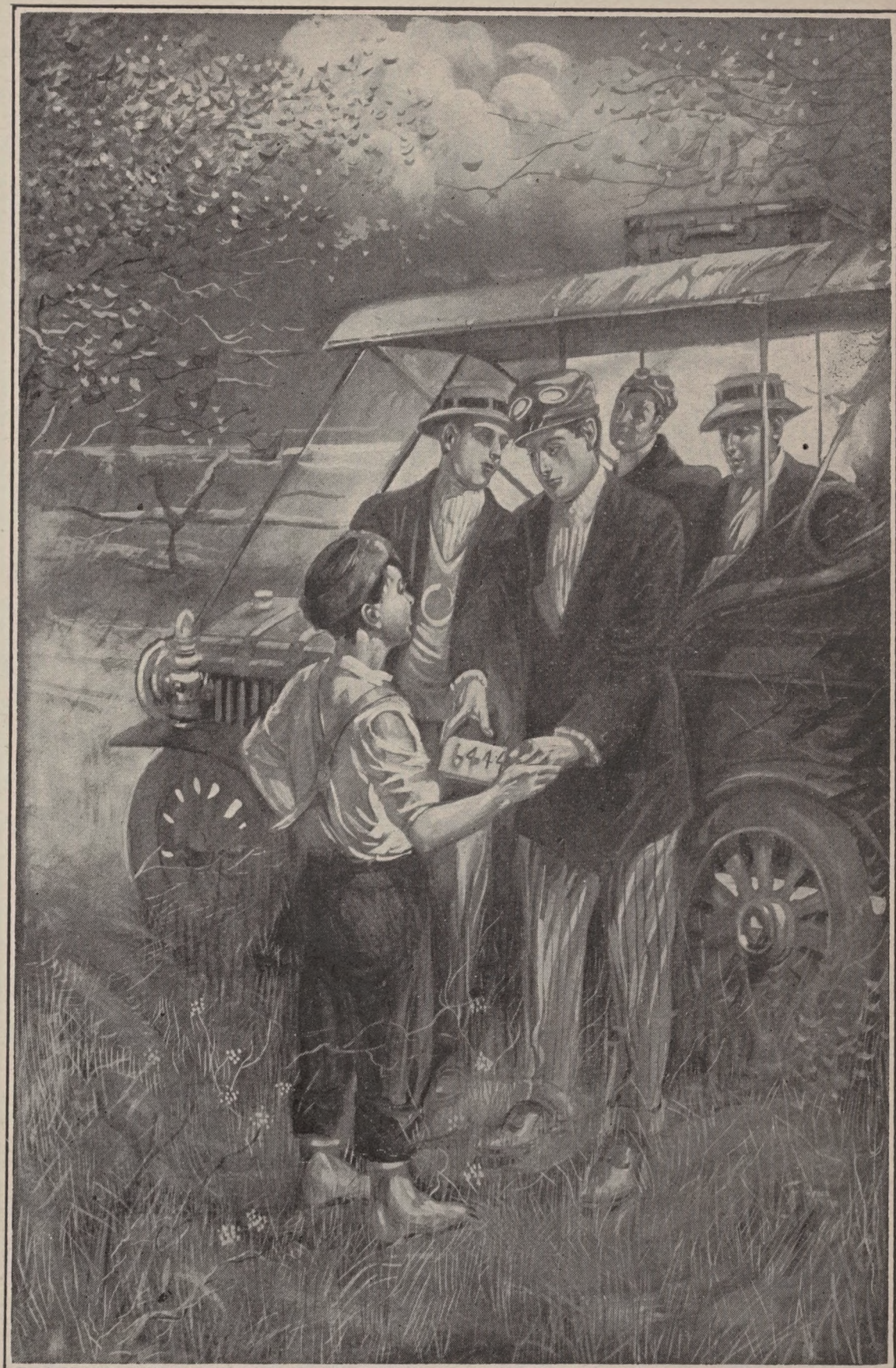
"Hush up! I understand him. He lisps, that's all," said Phil Way in an undertone. Directly all four boys clambered out of the car to examine the so unexpectedly recovered metal tag.

"Say, you're the same fellow that was snoopin' around here a bit ago! Where'd you say you got the license?" spoke MacLester brusquely, looking the boy over. "Where'd you say you found it, boy?"

Shifting from one dirty, bare foot to the other, his dancing eyes looking everywhere but at Dave, the youth made no reply.

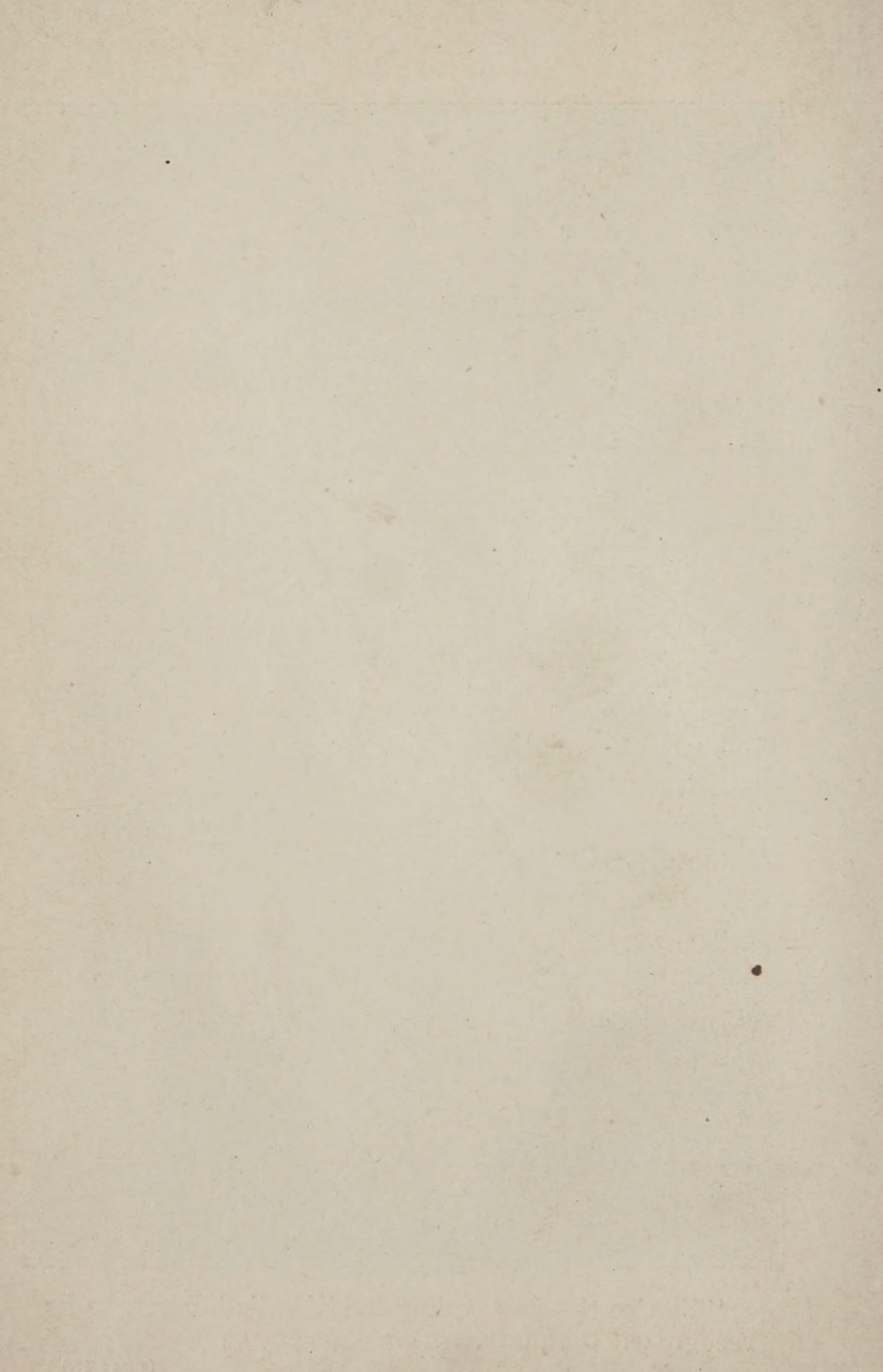
"You see it's mighty strange that those straps were unbuckled and that the tag got off in just that way without any help," put in Billy Worth.

All were now gazing curiously at the odd, little fellow who appeared to be both frightened and puzzled. He was probably eleven years old but his slight, slender figure caused him to appear even younger. His only clothing consisted of a pair of long trousers, rolled up



“You’re the fine, young lad!” called Jones, as he recognized the plate.

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roughly half way to his knees, a very dirty, blue cotton shirt, one suspender and a battered, beaver hat, several sizes too large.

A long, irregular rent down one seam of the first mentioned item of his apparel showed the bare and not very clean skin of one pitifully thin leg plainly. His torn shirt revealed a brown and dirty shoulder, also thin and wasted as if for want of sufficient nourishment.

But his eyes! Large, bright, shining eyes, they gave to his wan face an appearance truly attractive despite the grime from ear to ear and the uncombed dark hair which hung over his forehead and temples.

To Billy's observation the boy made no response but still shifted his feet uneasily and now studied the front, now the rear wheel of the automobile, and now the bale of baggage strapped behind.

"You look here, now! You crawled in under and swiped that plate off the car yourself, didn't you?" demanded Paul quite harshly.

Still no answer. A blue jay was crying un-

musically from a wild cherry tree across the road. His voice was little sharper than Jones'. Maybe the strange boy thought something of the kind for he turned and looked inquiringly in the bird's direction.

Over in the corn field a breeze was rustling the long leaves and the engine of the Thirty was chugging gently. For several seconds there was no other sound.

"Say, son, did you hook the tag or did you honestly find it?" asked Phil in a friendly way, smiling.

"I get lo," the youngster answered, turning his big eyes full upon the speaker. And then as if the smile and the friendly tone gave him courage, a sparkle kindling in his own glance, he said, "Lat blue jay ling pretty loud." Slowly he thrust his hands deep in his pockets and looked at the ground as he added, "I never had a ride in an automobile. Wit I could."

There was something very pathetic in the little chap's longing gaze at the big car and the soft, half sorrowful tone of the voice, made

child-like by his lisping. Yet his manner was funny, too, and Paul Jones laughed zestfully.

Being far from sensitive himself, Paul unfortunately seldom thought to spare those who might be. Still, Jones' merriment helped to produce a little laugh all around, save from the newcomer.

"Tell us the straight of it just where you got our number plate and we'll give you a ride in the automobile. Right up on the front seat, and maybe we'll let you drive her a little way," said Phil Way in that open, friendly manner that made it easy for him to be at once on good terms with anyone. "Tell us all about it, son."

"You going lat way?" asked the boy, pointing along the road in the direction the car headed.

Phil nodded and answered, "Yes."

The others were standing near, both interested and curious.

"How far can I ride?" was the next inquiry and Phil answered, "As far as you will want to walk back. But hurry up and tell about the tag.

We have ever so far to go and ought to be started now."

"Lay we all get in an' I'll tell about it along le way," came the response and a worldly-wise look in those big brown eyes.

"Pile in then," cried Billy Worth cheerily, but impatiently, too, and in another moment with Dave and Paul he was in the tonneau. The new boy needed no invitation more than he had previously received, to climb nimbly to the seat beside the driver, while Phil took the wheel.

Smoothly, easily, as it always did, the Thirty took the road and as the speed increased the expression on the young stranger's face grew more and more delighted. Then Phil slowed down to a ten-an-hour rate. So did the car proceed a couple of miles, perhaps.

"Say, Pete, you're forgetting something, I guess," called Dave MacLester, and he reached forward, tapping the dilapidated beaver hat in front of him.

The boy made no response and only turned about with a half-mischievous, half-injured look

when Paul Jones added: "Look here, young fellow, we won't let you get out of this car till you tell all about that tag of ours, and you're getting a good ways from home, mind!"

"I get lo," the youngster answered soberly, but with that same odd, knowing glance.

"I guess so, too, sonny," Phil Way spoke quietly. "A bargain's a bargain, you know. You don't want to have to walk a long way back and we can't take you. Let's hear it now. I'll drive just easy, and then maybe you can steer a bit."

"Let it go fat lome more," was the only response and the usually calm, kindly fellow at the wheel gave way to a sudden impulse to play what might have been a rather mean trick, by being the extreme of accommodating. If this mysterious young person wanted to go fast, and that was evidently what he meant, though he pronounced it "fat," his desire should be gratified. If he got a good three miles or more from home, that would be his fault.

Although the road right here was not the

best, Phil at once let the speedometer shoot up to the twenty-five-an-hour mark,—a fast pace for the load carried. His chums in the tonneau had heard the young stranger's evasive answer and request for speed. Guessing the joke, they smiled broadly as the distance their new acquaintance would have to trudge back was rapidly increased. That behind those great, bright eyes there was never a thought of doing such a thing not once suggested itself to them.

Not a word was spoken. Thomasboro, a mere hamlet built up about the country railroad station, was reached. Not until then did Phil slow down. At the four corners marking Thomasboro's center he stopped the car.

"Want to go any farther?" he asked significantly.

"Yet, I get lo," the queer little passenger answered; and, "Sure, let him have a nice long ride," chuckled Paul Jones.

Billy and Dave nodded assent as Way looked inquiringly around. There was no need to stop now that the lost license had been recovered,

and with a glance at the guide post to be sure of his direction, the driver slipped the clutch to place. A smile of determination flitted over his face, as for a moment he caught the strange boy's eye.

The minutes passed. Thomasboro was a mile to the rear. Not a word from Master Lisper yet. Of a sudden the car stopped.

"Now, Bright Eyes, this has ceased to be a joke," said Phil Way, equally suddenly. "You've got to get out of here and hike along home. What'll your folks say, anyway?"

But that pair of wondering, yet knowing, eyes simply turned away. Their owner said nothing.

"Come! Out you go!" commanded Phil, firmly, and gently pushed the boy's arm.

"But he's got to tell about that tag, you know," Dave suggested.

"Come on, Pete! I'll bet you're not half so green as you pretend, either."

"Well, we won't mind the tag, son, let it go; but you've got to skedaddle right now."

"Sixteen plus seven, you know," suggested

Billy, feeling pretty sure the stranger did *not* know his meaning.

“Hop along, now! Are you *going?*” Phil urged, in a pretty business-like tone.

“I get not. I get I’ll go along where you go. I tink I like you pretty well.”

“Well, I bet I know *your* name,” laughed Paul Jones. “Why, you’re a first cousin to I. M. Pudence, sure!”

“I get lo,” said the odd little creature once again, and in his smile was such a mixture of guile and innocence that none knew what to make of it. But as he tossed back the dark hair from his forehead and turned his face to the tonneau the chums could not but notice that he was a remarkably handsome youngster, despite the dirt and rags.

CHAPTER IV

AND FIVE THERE WERE

Already the afternoon was well advanced. Less than fifteen miles ahead lay Sunfield, scheduled as the night stopping place. What should be done? Clearly, Bright Eyes could not be taken so far. Clearly, he must be disposed of in some way and quickly; but how? His thin little legs were certainly not equal to the long tramp home. Though he had been warned, he was too little to hold strictly accountable because of that.

Some such thoughts were in Phil Way's mind. The frank, engaging manner in which the little shaver had said in his own lisping way, "I tink I like you pretty well," make the older lad just a bit ashamed to have carried him so far.

"If we take you back to Thomasboro will you run along home from there?" asked Way, at last.

The boy shook his head from side to side.

"If we take you on to Sunfield will you go back to Thomasboro on the train, then hike home, if we pay your fare?"

"Sure, you will," put in Paul Jones. "Sure! You can say 'I get lo' to that, can't you?"

"You see we like you real well and all that, and would like to take you along, but it would never do at all, at all," put in Billy, coaxingly.

The way the youngster refused to answer was aggravating. Even Phil was not a little irritated. "You've got to speak up, here, one way or another, or we'll simply have to pitch you out and leave you," said he.

"All right len. I don't care," the boy exclaimed at last in a quick, decisive, self-reliant way and hopped down from his seat beside Phil and stood at the roadside.

His great eyes again looked longingly, oh, very longingly indeed, at the car. Otherwise his expression was quite as usual, showing neither anger because of his being denied a still longer ride, nor pleasure for that which had been given

him. If anything beside the hungry look was in his face, it was sorrow or something closely like it,—a sort of melancholy.

“Bye-bye,” called Phil in a friendly way and slowly the Thirty moved off.

“Go light home, lat’s a good boy,” Paul Jones shouted, imitating the little fellow’s broken speech. But none of the three in the tonneau chanced to look back over the bale of supplies strapped behind, and if the youthful adventurer answered or even heard, they did not know.

“What do you suppose that bantam meant by riding so far and insisting on going further? He’ll have about five miles to walk, if he doesn’t find a ride,” remarked Billy Worth when the Thirty was again in full swing.

“D’ye know, I think the cherub has us all buffaloed,” suggested Paul.

“Why didn’t he want to tell about that tag? We didn’t care a lot where he got it, after we had it back again, anyway.”

None of this conversation reached Phil on the front seat, but he was thinking along the same

lines for, when Dave climbed over to the vacant place beside him, he said: "Funny how that boy has made me think of all the fairy tale heroes I ever read about, from Jack the Giant Killer to Aladdin and—"

"Aladdin and his wonderful 'lamps,' " broke in Dave with a laugh, making a slang reference to the strange boy's extraordinary eyes. But he went on at once, quite seriously: "There'll be no good come of our picking him up, you see." In which prediction of some unseen misfortune—or fear of no bridge over some river that would never be reached nor exist—Mr. David MacLester was entirely like himself.

Fortunately Phil knew his friend too well to be disturbed by all the foretelling of trouble in which Dave might indulge. He laughed at the prophecy, yet he pondered long regarding the strange boy, too, and was sorry they had not turned back with him, at least to Thomasboro.

Travel-stained, but purring along as quietly and easily as could be desired, the car of the Auto Boys rolled into the smooth, and delight-

fully shaded streets of Sunfield. Children stopped their play to see it pass. Boys looked wistfully after the big machine and its young passengers, so evidently on pleasure bent.

Whence came these youthful travelers and whither were they bound? Undoubtedly these questions in some form, a half hundred individuals,—old ladies, young ladies, old men, young men, boys and girls—asked themselves, or one another, while the *Thirty* sped comfortably along the main street of the little town.

Lying somewhat away from the most frequented roads, Sunfield seldom saw auto tourists and the four friends quickly discovered that they attracted much attention. Indeed, on two occasions people called out to them, but the words were not heard distinctly and, thinking they were only greetings, a wave of the hand was sufficient answer. So did the car glide into the yard of the little hotel on the corner, where quarters for the night were to be engaged.

Out over the baggage that crowded the tonneau clambered Billy and Paul. From his

place at the wheel Phil Way jumped down and Dave followed. Shaking the dust from caps and coats, and Phil pulling off his goggles, they prepared to enter the hostelry to arrange for their accommodations.

"Step this way. How many of you?" called a brisk young fellow in shirt sleeves, who had stood in the doorway.

"I get lere are five," came a treble voice in answer.

No need to ask whose! The chums recognized it instantly.

"Gee Whiz! It's Jack, the Giant Killer!" cried Phil Way, bursting into a laugh in spite of himself. "Where in the world did *you* come from?" he demanded.

And while the four wondering friends gazed in astonishment, the mysterious boy pointed to the big baggage rack and straps, which supported the goods fastened to the rear. For mile after mile he had clung to them. He had suffered hardship but he had not been left

behind, and his eyes shone both mischievously and pleadingly.

"Why, certainly, we're *glad* you came! You're our man Friday," laughed Billy Worth, as if in answer to the unspoken, coaxing question that pair of eyes asked. "You are, now, aren't you?" he added, his own eyes brimming with merriment.

"I get lo," was the half-timid, half-confident answer.

"Our fine young *puzzle*," said Paul Jones, aside. "We've got a white elephant on *our* hands or I'm no judge;—a fine young baby elephant."

But now quite a crowd was collecting about the machine and manifesting no little curiosity both as to the tourists and the quite remarkable fifth member of the party.

"They called the little chap 'Jack the Giant Killer.' That's odd, ain't it?" one young man was heard to say.

"He don't seem to belong to them. Looks

like a case of runaway," another fellow commented.

While probably not averse to attracting notice—few young fellows are, if the truth be known—The Auto Boys had no wish to discuss their affairs before strangers, and Phil went to work to get the suit cases detached from the car without further delay. The others joined him and with, "Now Jack, you keep right beside me," to their new friend, Way soon piloted the party into the hotel.

Two large rooms, each containing a double bed, were assigned the travelers. Although he was still very much in doubt as to what was to be done with Bright Eyes, Phil asked that a cot for their fifth member be placed in the apartment which he and Billy were to occupy. In the latter room, also, a council of war—Billy called it a "pow-wow"—was held as soon as the young man who showed the guests their quarters left them.

Of course the subject of the discussion was the strange boy. Likewise was he the object of

such a volley of questions as to why he was where he was, and why he was not where he wasn't but should have been, that, very naturally, he presently became too confused to murmur even his favorite, "I get lo."

"In mercy's name, be quiet a minute, you fellows!" exclaimed Captain Phil, at last. "Let's see if we can't *arrive* at something, if we talk one at a time."

Then he began at the beginning to question the mysterious little stranger. Results worth while came very slowly. Asked his name, the youngster answered, "I haven't any." To the question, where he lived, he replied in the same unsatisfactory way.

"Where are you going? Where *were* you going when you saw our car at the roadside?" Phil inquired.

"Ever so far," was the answer; and except that he slept on the ground in a cornfield the preceding night; had obtained his breakfast that morning in a farmhouse kitchen while the mistress thereof was feeding her chickens, and

that he was bent on remaining in his present company indefinitely, very little of consequence did the examination disclose.

There were, however, in the very attractive little fellow's answers to the questions, a certain knowing manner and at times a hesitation, as if he set a guard upon himself against revealing more than he cared to have known. It was hard, also, to believe, looking into his intelligent, open countenance, that the youngster was not in every respect a good, average boy and in full possession of normal faculties.

"Well, suppose we refuse to take you in? Suppose we have to say we simply can't do it? What will you do then?" asked Phil, after a half hour's questioning. His voice was still kindly. Impatient as he had very naturally become, and worried as he certainly was, his manner was gentle, though he spoke with unmistakable firmness. "What will you do in that case?" he repeated.

"Blame it! Everyling and everybody lat I like go again't me!" the boy burst out with

much more energy than he had yet shown. But he spoke so unhappily and with such utter dejection, that Phil, at least, gave way to pity then and there.

Indeed, excepting only Dave, fearful of some dire consequence following the association, all the chums had for some time been ready to take this childish wayfarer in as one of them.

“Well, until we know your real one, we’ll just have to call you by most any name,” Way responded almost despairingly, “and so, Jack, we’ll all clean up and have some supper. Then we’ll have a good, big sleep in these dandy, cool, country beds, right by the open windows, and maybe we’ll all feel better in the morning. How does that sound? Hungry, aren’t you, Jack?”

But the boy only nodded. His head had fallen down quite to his shoulder and not until now was it noticed that he had become pale to the verge of fainting. Billy was first to observe this.

“He’s just about all in, Phil!” exclaimed Worth. “We must let him lie down.”

Dirt and all, the worn-out boy was led to the bed, and there Paul and Billy bathed him while Phil hustled down stairs to fetch some warm milk, and Dave repaired to the yard to run the car under cover and see that, together with contents, it was put in good order for the night.

"Lat feel ju't fine," murmured the boy, as he felt the soft wash cloth upon his feverish face and hands.

"Gosh! you needed it," chirped Paul; but at a reproachful look from Billy Worth he said, very gently: "Don't want to hurt your feelings, old man. Gee Whiz! We would all of us stand a bath without getting into the molly-coddle class, I reckon!"

Awkwardly as the two boys did go about the bathing of the younger lad, and no mistake, they did it all so kindly that he smiled up at them with a sigh of exquisite satisfaction. The improvement they wrought in a very few minutes was so noticeable, also, even to their unpracticed eyes, that they resolved to make thorough work of it.

“If you could just stand up long enough to get your clothes off and splash around in this big wash bowl a little, you’d feel better yet,” suggested Billy, paving the way. “Don’t suppose there’s any regular *bath*-room in the house.”

Bright Eyes said neither yes nor no, but helped along the operation of removing his wretched garments, and stepped into the big bowl placed upon the floor, without comment.

Soon Phil came with a plate of toast and bowl of milk just slightly warmed. “That’s the ticket!” he exclaimed upon seeing what was going on.

He placed the tray upon a little table and picked up the boy’s discarded clothes to put them aside. Perhaps he handled them a little gingerly. They were certainly not in the condition to be taken up otherwise. Still, he would have done anything rather than give offense, and he was pained no less than interested by the remark that followed the action.

“Ley ain’t mine. I’ve”—the wayfarer ex-

claimed with some vehemence, but checked himself suddenly.

"Not your clothes, Jack? Whose *are* they?" Phil inquired, trying to appear just casually interested.

"I get ley are mine, if I haven't got any o'ler," the youngster smiled, but in a confused way. Then he added quickly, "Tee low le rain hat got on lat wall paper!"

It was of no use to ask further questions; but the boy's unguarded expression had certainly opened up a fertile field for speculation. Also, his obvious effort to attract notice quickly to another subject had not escaped his new-found friends. However, when he had eaten, which he did sitting up in bed, he was left to himself, while all the boys went to Paul's and Dave's room to perform their own ablutions. They promised to come back soon and if "Jack" felt well enough, to take him down with them to supper in the hotel dining-room.

They were gone from him not more than twenty minutes but when they returned he was

sleeping soundly. Nothing could be more natural than this, yet it was not natural that both windows of the room should be found tightly closed and fastened on this warm August night. They had been open wide just a little while before.

CHAPTER V

NINETY MILES TO GO

The sudden and mysterious addition of a fifth member to their party naturally occupied the thoughts of the young tourists to a marked extent. It kept them busily talking as they sat at supper and afterward, as they strolled about exploring the little town. Now and again some reference to the empty house toward which they were journeying would take their conversation to that and similar subjects for a time, for this was an important topic, too.

Another night, they reminded one another, would find them quartered in that dwelling which for years had stood untenanted; and it would probably be not far from the truth to say, that, as the time of their taking possession drew near, they really relished the thought much less than they pretended.

“Kind of a crazy place for an outing anyhow,” MacLester half growled. “And now we’ve got a little tramp on our hands who’s either weak in his head or something else, and you can pretty near count on it that this whole vacation will be more or less foolish all around.”

Though David had some reason for his pessimistic prediction, it will be admitted, his words were given scant heed by his companions.

“If there’s a hoodoo on this trip anywhere, Jones’ old hammock is responsible for it,” laughed Billy Worth. “But,” he added, and his manner gave room to suspect that he was talking to preserve his own courage—“But,” said he, “I guess the old place and the neighborhood, too, will know that there’s someone living there, for a while, at least, before we tear up to start back.”

It was a better guess—much better—than young Mr. Worth supposed.

That the waif of the road who had attached himself to the party, whether for good or for

ill, must be taken along to the journey's end, seemed highly probable. The only other course was to turn the little chap over to the town or county authorities, to which neither Phil nor Billy would consent.

All hoped, however, that with the coming of morning the youngster would feel more free, or better able to reveal his identity. No matter how willingly he should go with them, no matter, indeed, how anxious he might be that he should be taken, was there not a strong likelihood that sooner or later his friends or relatives would appear and, quite possibly, cause trouble? This question was too serious not to be considered.

"We will throw away those horrible clothes of his and give him one of Paul's suits, or buy him something here in Sunfield, in the morning," said Phil Way, with determination. "We will take better care of him than he has been accustomed to, for some time past, anyway, and that's not saying a whole lot either. Then when someone claims him, or we find out where

he belongs, what sort of cattle would they be if his folks were anything but glad? Poor little duffer, I—”

“That’s all right,” Billy broke in, “but just as I said before,” referring to an earlier discussion, “the boy’s afraid of somebody or something and that’s why he shut those windows down after we left him. If we take him up we take up his fight, whatever it is, with him; and his own folks, if he’s just a runaway, would have the law on their side. There are a good many things to be considered.”

Volumes of talk could not have settled the subject. Time must be allowed to bring its own developments, and the Auto Boys retraced their steps to the hotel and prepared to go to bed. Their new friend was found still sleeping,—a disappointment, as some supper more substantial than toast and milk had been kept warm in the kitchen down stairs, at their suggestion. But, acting on the theory that sleep and rest are sometimes more beneficial than food, Paul carried the word below that the meal might be

put away, and in a little while the chums bade one another good-night.

"Young Mystery better be left where he is, I s'pose. I'll crawl in beside him and you take the cot, if you don't mind, Bill," suggested Phil. He had re-opened the windows wide, and the two were undressing by the faint rays shining in from a street lamp.

"I 'get lo,'" said Billy with a subdued chuckle over his imitation of Little Mystery's style of speech. "He's sure taken a fancy to *you*, Phil, as you have to him."

Way made no response but crawled gently over the childish figure to sleep at the "back" rather than disturb the youngster by moving him. As he did so Master Mystery awakened suddenly and, as if much frightened, rose up. He became calm at once when Phil spoke, however, and denied that he had been scared.

"I wit lote window wat down," said the boy in a serious tone.

Phil had by this time stretched himself comfortably at the back side of the bed.

"Oh, they should be up, son," he answered. "It's such a warm night. You *are* afraid of something, aren't you, Jack?"

"Didn't I tleep in a cornfield lat night? Wat lat bein' afraid?" came the response in tones of denial.

"No, that wasn't being afraid, sure. But maybe you were hiding there, Jack?"

To this there came no reply. Still, the strange young wayfarer continued so plainly nervous regarding the open windows that Way said presently: "Maybe you'd like to sleep behind, Jack. Maybe you don't like the night air. Shall I sleep in front?"

"I get lo," was the quite pleased answer to this question so tactfully framed, and the tall boy and the little fellow exchanged places, then both were still.

Across the commons, just beyond the rural hostelry, came the sounds of the crickets. From the marsh which bordered the field the frogs were faintly heard. Sunfield was asleep.

Phil lay for a long time thinking—wondering

deeply what chain of circumstances had brought him so entirely unexpected a bed-fellow. He thought much, too, of his own and his companions' duty in the matter of the extraordinary acquaintanceship that had come to them. Then he pondered on what he would like to do if he had only his own wishes to consider.

From these reflections there grew a sleepy and still more sleepy notion that the Young American Contract Company might adopt Bright Eyes and among its members make a home for him. He could go to school with them and work and play with them and—and it all wound up in Phil falling into sound sleep in the midst of a dream that the strange boy was keeping house, quite by himself, in the Retreat—the hillside cave in Gleason's Ravine.

To those who have followed the adventures of the Auto Boys from the beginning, it will not be necessary to explain that the Young American Contract Company was the boys' own organization; that the Retreat was the rendezvous near which had been concealed the money so

mysteriously stolen in the very early part of the summer.

For those not familiar with the first story of this series, it is essential to state that, under the name of the Young American Contract Company, the four boys had earned and saved money sufficient to make a first payment on an automobile. Their work included a newspaper route, now left in the hands of a reliable substitute, and a great variety of other more or less regular tasks, such as mowing lawns, for instance, all work being undertaken on a very business-like contract basis. Of course, for their steady customers it had been necessary to provide other help during the weeks of the outing, and all of these arrangements had been given excellent care.

Contracts thus necessarily sub-let, it was true, would not be at all profitable; but the period was only for a few weeks at most, and the one thousand dollars obtained for them by Dan Dilworth left plenty of ready cash on hand after every dollar due on the auto was paid.

As in practically all their undertakings, the boys themselves paid all the expenses of their vacation. For a long time they had been accustomed to do this, not from necessity, for all had good homes, but because they had learned the greater pleasure and satisfaction which comes with the earning of one's own money. Nor would they have given up their comparative independence for a great deal.

As a leading physician of Lannington, Dr. Way was prosperous. He would willingly have given his son money to spend, but he encouraged the latter's success in earning it, instead, because in no other manner could lessons in the value of money and in business methods be so well obtained.

Mr. Worth, a manufacturer, undoubtedly entertained similar views with regard to Mr. William Worth, Jr. Dave MacLester's father was of the very strict kind who believes that the boys have no need of more than the price of admission tickets on circus day, and something for fireworks on the Fourth; but so long as

David earned his own money, and was in good company, he asked few questions.

Poor Paul was much less favorably situated. An orphan from childhood, his home had long been with a sister, much older than himself, and her husband, John Wilby. Both were kind to the lad but their income was not large and most of it must go toward the home for which they were paying.

So, while Paul had plenty to eat and clothes to wear and was kept in school, they felt their duty to him well done, as indeed it was. How fortunate for the active young fellow, then, that he had opportunities of earning something for himself!

Now and again, in serious moments, he thought over his situation and was glad that he was not absolutely dependent. If two serious thoughts on the same subject came in succession, as happened at rare intervals, the second was one of pride that, even at his age, he could provide for much of his own clothing and his other general needs. He was glad because

this relieved John Wilby of the expense, and he liked his brother-in-law extremely well.

Sometimes his day dreams, taking shape from passing serious thoughts such as have been mentioned, grew into great castles in the air. In them he saw himself grown to manhood and rapidly acquiring wealth. He pictured the time when he might say to John Wilby,—quite patronizingly, it may be imagined—“There! that matter of your having taken care of me when I was a boy, John. Here’s a thousand dollars to pay you back. If it isn’t enough just let me know. You and my sister, Emma, gave me a home when I had none and I won’t forget it. Here are five hundred dollars for her and there’s more where this came from.”

Oh, there were times, though, when the orphan’s innermost thoughts would have moved the sternest heart, had they been known. Rough and ready, harum-scarum, lively young fellow that he was, one can but smile to contemplate the lofty place he gave himself—as what boy does not?—in his castles of the future; but often

back of it all was the feeling of dependence, and his sense of loss and loneliness.

Then it chiefly was that he would come at last to fancying himself grown up—grown up and wealthy and making most generous return for honest John Wilby's goodness. And with such hopeful visions his heart would grow light again and no one would have guessed that he ever felt the pain of wanting a mother's love and sympathy, or a father's encouragement, or realized that he was deprived of them—an orphan.

But all the troubled or sorrowful thoughts that came to Paul at times were for the present certainly banished. He lay with bare legs drawn up to his body while wrapped tightly round him and seeming to have tied itself into several knots, after the extraordinary manner of such things, was a sheet,—his only covering. Soundly he slept, and Dave MacLester, tied up, apparently, in a light coverlid in an exactly similar manner, was in the bed beside him.

Another day had dawned in Sunfield. Broad

daylight streamed in at the window of the little hotel and the picture described is what Billy Worth beheld when he opened the unlocked door of the room his two friends occupied.

Quietly Billy stepped to the bed. He picked up a pillow, fallen to the floor, and with firm grasp prepared to use it.

"Say! Don't sleep all day!" he shouted, and without further warning brought the pillow down with a muffled thud, hard upon the head of Paul first, then Dave.

In infinitely less time than it takes to tell it the pillow from under Dave's head went flying heavily full into Worth's face and MacLester himself followed his own well directed aim from the bed.

"You *better* dig!" he cried and caught the feathery weapon hurled back at him on his arm.

"Thunder! is he *up* already?" ejaculated Jones, as Billy, with a leap and dive escaped through the door, and instantly he proceeded to get into his own clothes with a degree of alacrity and speed attainable, on such occasions,

by but one member of the human family—a boy.

Talk of things scientific! If false motions and imperfect calculations could be eliminated from all things, absolutely, as they are from a boy's getting into his every-day clothes when he has something important—to himself—in view, the saving of energy would be impossible of estimate.

Phil Way had been up for some time. Without so much as “by your leave,”—’twould have been quite superfluous—he had appropriated a shirt and pants from Paul’s suit case and helped the little stranger into them. The garments were not so very ill-fitting either. Jones was under size for his age, and the clothing thus provided was from his last summer’s suit and now would have been a trifle small for him.

All in all, then, Bright Eyes made a decidedly improved appearance when the boys were ready for breakfast and he went down stairs with the others, keeping close, however, to Mr. Philip Way. He smiled across the table in a most de-

lightfully chummy and confidential manner at Billy, Dave and Paul and up into the eyes of Phil, beside him.

If he had not been a favorite already he must soon have become one with that pleasing manner of his, and if any of the boys had had the remotest thought of leaving him behind, it vanished instantly when, looking from one to another joyously, he said:

“Lay, now. I link lit it pretty fine! Le auto will run pretty good today.”

And the odd little lost boy,—stolen boy—run-away boy—homeless, wandering boy—what should he be called?—was right in both his observations.

The breakfast was all that could be desired. The morning was glorious, and ninety miles of speed and fun in a reliable motor car stretched out ahead—stretched out to night and to that lonely and empty house, very soon to be neither one nor the other for a time, at least.

CHAPTER VI

A BAD SPILL AND THE RESULT

“Jack and I will gather up the traps, upstairs, while you fellows get the car around to the door and ready to start,” said Phil Way, as breakfast was finished. His little plan thus to make an opportunity to talk alone with the strange boy was quite apparent and Billy, Paul and Dave trooped out through the hotel office.

“You aren’t goin’ to lay I can’t go?” asked Bright Eyes with deep concern, when, having reached their room, Phil said to him: “Jack, we just don’t know what we are going to do about you.”

He did not answer the boy’s question at once, but went on: “Why won’t you tell us something about yourself, Jack? We’d be glad to take you if we knew it was really all right for us to do it; but we can’t decide that until you tell about yourself. So here’s your chance, Jack, while

you and I are alone. You know us all now, and you just let me hear who you are and why you aren't at home, if you have one, and you know I'll take care of you, Jack, and do what's best for you and all of us."

Phil's tone was kind and certainly his whole manner invited confidence. Did Bright Eyes find it hard to resist his entreaty? Was it because he was tempted, yet feared to make the revelation asked of him, that he answered nothing? Once he opened his lips as if to speak, then turned suddenly, walked to the window, and looked out. But he uttered not a word.

"Why, we don't know even your name, you know. How can we be the good friends we want to be when you act this way, Jack?" Again Phil spoke gently, pleadingly.

There came no answer but for an instant a tear glistened in each of those fine eyes. Then suddenly the little chap rushed to the bed and buried his face in a pillow. He did not break into sobs—apparently did not cry, though only his greatest efforts prevented it. The friendly

pillow did conceal his tears though, until he had somewhat gained a mastery of his emotions. Then he arose and hastily began to unbutton his shirtwaist—Paul Jones' shirtwaist.

“Here now, what's this?” cried Phil. “What's the matter Jack, old man?” and he took the lad gently by the arm.

“I ju't can't tell what you want me to. I can't go in le auto. I can't wear lete clo't' len. I'm ju't miterable at I can be!” The answer came quick and fast and another strong effort was necessary on the youngster's part to keep back a sob. And although he also kept the tears from his eyes, by the same visible determination, they were very thick and unhappy in his voice.

Phil Way's preconceived determination that he would be kind but very firm with the little chap melted from his mind.

“Hold on now, Jack,” he said quickly, staying the hand which was already slipping out of the shirtwaist sleeve, “just you wait a second. Answer me this: Do you live near the place

where we found you yesterday? If you have run away from home, is it because the automobile attracted you? You can tell me that much, Jack."

"You needn't be afraid of anyling like lat," the little fellow answered, quickly divining that Phil's fear was that the Auto Boys would be blamed for enticing him away with them. "Lere aren't nobdy in le world to ever lay anyling to you, unlet it are—it are—" He hesitated, then stopped and again looked searchingly down the street through the open window. "Unlet it are—" again he came to a full stop.

In vain Phil waited for him to continue, then asked him to go on. It was no use. For, when he urged, there came that flash of sudden determination in the two big eyes and again those quick little hands began to remove the clothes which were another's.

"All right, Jack, never mind; you'll have more confidence in us soon, I think," said Way quietly; but in his heart there came the resolute intention of finding out the mystery of this most

strange young specimen of attractiveness and perversity if it took the rest of the summer. He could only believe and hope it would be for the waif's own good. He did not know. No one knew.

"I wouldn't have let him bluff *me* that way," was Paul Jones' comment when, aside, Phil told the result of the talk in the room upstairs. "You're too easy by a big lot. But bring him along, sure! *I'd* like to *keep* him."

Dave MacLester darkly hinted that there would come a day of sorrow and regret for it, yet voted also to take care of the young wayfarer pending further developments.

Billy, like Paul, derided Phil's efforts to gain information from the boy, on the ground that he was much too tender-hearted; but, also like Jones, he was anxious to take the waif with them. Indeed he would have been genuinely sorry just at this time had anything arisen to prevent their doing so. Secretly he was of the opinion that when *he* found just the right opportunity he would, by his superior methods of

questioning, be able to get some light on the subject of the youngster's identity.

One sensible precaution the boys did take was to leave their future address at the hotel office, for use in case inquiry should be made. Without revealing the whole story they indicated to the proprietor the possibility that friends might be asking about the fifth member of their party—a little fellow of whom they were taking care for a while.

All in all, so much time was consumed in the discussion of the disposition of Bright Eyes, and the arrangements it would be necessary to make with regard to him that that young gentleman himself, who for twenty minutes had been waiting in the car, grew exceedingly impatient. Repeatedly he looked far down the road traversed the day before, as the machine stood in readiness.

“Better hurry up! I link it look like rain!” he called at last. But as the sky was clear, the sun bright and no *sign* of rain existed, the chums only laughed. “Don’t you ever set out to be a

weather prophet, Little Mystery; the government would want *you* sure," said Paul, as they climbed aboard.

Dave MacLester's steady hand gripped the steering wheel. Away over the dusty, country road the Thirty flew. Where the course permitted, Dave put on speed and words were possible only by almost shouting. Where the way was rough, Billy, Paul and Bright Eyes had all they could do to maintain their seats in the tonneau, even with the car traveling moderately. Phil was busily watching a road map to help MacLester keep the right course, and so few words were spoken.

But there are times when conversation is in no wise essential to the finest kind of companionship. It is not always necessary to hear, or even see, good friends to feel and enjoy their presence and company. And certain it is that every one of the five occupants of that automobile, chugging so merrily through the August morning, was having a truly delightful time and finding pleasure in every foot of the way.

Down a long slope the auto zipped at a lively clip. Time was, when they were less familiar with the car, that all four owners would have been watching the road closely. Now that detail was left entirely to him who occupied the driver's seat.

No doubt Dave was watching the road all right and no doubt he would have driven down that slope, across the little bridge at the bottom, and up the grade beyond a hundred times again without accident; but somewhere, in this instance, he miscalculated. A front tire struck sidewise on a large stone, the machine swerved sharply and before MacLester could regain control, skidded half way around and plunged over a low embankment into a dense growth of low bushes and weeds.

Phil Way was pitched head foremost into the brush-grown corner of a rail fence. Paul Jones just dropped over the tonneau door as if he had been lifted up, then allowed to fall. The strange boy and Billy hit hard against each other, and the forward seats.

It was the luckiest happening imaginable that no one was seriously hurt. Their only injury worth mentioning came to Dave, who was thrown violently against the steering wheel and to catch his breath again needed a good five minutes.

“It my note bleedin’?” asked Master Mystery of Billy, holding one hand on to that member of his features, but with a beaming smile and dancing eyes, despite the shock. His nose was bleeding, and profusely, though little he seemed to mind it.

In fact, the exceedingly happy disposition of the waif under all sorts of circumstances attracted the notice and comment of his older friends many, many times in the days following, as it did now. Only occasionally would he lose himself in what seemed extremely serious thoughts. At such times he would sit for a half hour or more, his sober reflections plainly indicated upon his bright, pleasing face. And only then was there any reason to believe that in his past, reference to which he ever avoided,

there had been either trouble or great misfortune.

“Takes more’n a plunge down a bank to phase you, don’t it, Pete?” said Paul Jones, rubbing his knee and looking about quite dejectedly. “How we’re ever going to get out of here, I don’t see.”

“Have to go and hire a team and get held up for about five or ten dollars,” growled Billy, studying the almost perpendicular embankment.

MacLester crawled down from his seat, where he had been industriously getting his respiratory organs into working order again, and clambered up to the roadway. “Here’s the stone I hit!” he called, his voice quite wheezy. “You don’t need say a word! I surely ought to have a tin medal for this!”

But it was quite characteristic of the working principles of the Auto Boys toward one another that no one thought of putting blame for the accident upon the driver—no one save Dave himself.

“We’ve got a terrific battle on hand,” that

young gentleman continued, and again he assured everybody present that he ought to receive a tin badge—a “real nice, shiny tin badge and a string to hang it by.”

“Oh, say, fellows! this is not going to be so bad!” cried Phil Way, with sudden enthusiasm. He had made a brief inspection of the car, which was found to be unharmed, then had taken a good look at the lay of the land.

“We have only to open this rail fence, run through and across the brook, open the fence on the other side, and run onto the road again. The bank slopes real gradually, across the bridge.”

Good for Captain Phil! He had simply used his head again, but the result was to dispel at once every cloud on the horizon and make what Dave had termed a “terrific battle” only a mild skirmish at most.

“Here goes, then,” continued Way, when the others, grasping at once his simple plan, gave prompt assent. “Here goes!” and he stepped toward the fence. On the ground lay the box

with all that excess of soap, thrown from its place in front by the car's sudden plunge. He gathered it up together with its contents which now included, also, the discarded clothes of the mysterious boy. They had been chucked into this receptacle for want of any opportunity to throw them away before leaving the hotel.

As Phil gathered up the worn and dirty garments—hastily deciding they must be taken along lest some person, as yet unknown, should some time demand them—a tooth brush fell from a trousers pocket. He picked the brush up and for want of a better place put it in his coat.

He could not but wonder that an article so indicative of refinement and cleanliness should have fallen from such a source. Little he thought then, as he came to know afterward, that the mere incident of this brush being thus brought to his notice was of more consequence in the history of the outing than was the quite considerable accident to the car.

The plunge over the bank was but the hap-

pening of an hour, done with at the close of the day, at most. The simple little fact of the brush being found, as one of the results of the mishap, became in time the one great thing which made the car's plunge something to be remembered.

And just so is it often found in other matters. That to which we attach for a while the utmost importance pales and fades into insignificance. At the same time something which seems trivial, at the moment, assumes in later days inestimable proportions.

All in good time, Phil worked out these thoughts in his own mind. He was old beyond his years in making such studies. If ultimately he found a suggestion of value in the reflections here reported, it was, perhaps, that not events so much as their consequences are important; that not only what one shall do but always even the distant consequences, as well, should have advance consideration.

An opening was quickly made in the tumble-down rail fence and the Thirty glided through. "And she went as nicely," declared Billy

Worth, "as if her behavior had never been so downright unladylike."

While Bright Eyes and Paul laid up the rails in the one place, Worth and Way opened the fence across the brook, and Dave drove onto the road again. It was just about thirty minutes from the time of the car's plunge until the party was once more making good time forward.

Noon found the tourists pleasantly encamped where a large stream skirted the road, with only a fringe of grass and trees between. A jolly repast they made of it. For the tenth time, at least, an effort was made to have Little Mystery tell whether he had not himself taken the license tag from the car the day before.

Almost in desperation, he said, after many evasions: "If you won't lend me away, and won't be crott I will tell you about lat tag, but I ju't can't tell anyling elt, lo lere!"

Of course the little chap was assured that he would not be sent away and that no one would be cross. Then he said that, when he first came up to the car, it was his intention to take some-

thing, run back a little way, and, returning, pretend he had found the article, and so win favor. After obtaining the license tag and running away he was for a time afraid to return. Indeed, he was deeply impressed by the thought that he had committed a theft. And now, when he owned up to it, he looked from one to another of the boys in great embarrassment. Yet there shone at the same time in those luminous eyes a pleading, "now-you-don't-care-do-you?" look that was entirely captivating.

"That's just the way we thought you did it, Jack," spoke Phil, for all, "but still you see we don't know why you wanted to do it—where you came from, or even your name. Better have the whole thing off your mind at once, Jack."

"I've been linking about lat very ling," said the boy slowly and soberly; but that was all he did say.

When Phil prompted him again he used his own perfectly obvious but pleasing little way of seeking to lead the conversation into new channels, by observing naively: "Lere are prob-

ably ever so many fit in lat creek, don't you link?"

And now we come to the more principal scenes of this narrative—scenes of incidents more strange and exciting than often fall to any one group of boys within a period of a few weeks. For the day is nearly over and the next house down the road—that weather-beaten, empty house, where the old pines rear their heads high above the rank growth of the neglected doorway,—that is the house where Grandfather Beaman used to live.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE OLD FARM HOUSE

The sun was going down in a bank of clouds, making noticeably sombre the shadows about the old house, as the Auto Boys brought their car to a halt before it.

“Doesn’t look so bad, I guess?” queried Billy Worth cheerfully, but scanning the vacant windows and weed-grown surroundings a little dubiously, too.

“Finer than silk;” cried Phil, enthusing as he sighted apples in the orchard, and got a glimpse of the really fine river just beyond the trees. “This is all *right!*”

“Glad we got here before dark, just the same,” observed Dave MacLester grimly.

Master Bright Eyes had clambered from the tonneau and with Paul was putting down the old-fashioned bars across the road, leading into the yard at the right of the dwelling. Directly

the car was driven in, and as close as practicable to the side porch of the house, preparatory to unloading.

Jones was busy with his keys, also, and in another two minutes the empty rooms echoed more footsteps than had fallen within their precincts for many a day—at least so far as anyone knew.

While the unpleasant, heavy air, found always in places long closed, was there, of course, and the wind and rain had entered at one or two shattered windows, leaving their traces dark upon the floors and walls, the old dwelling was still in quite habitable condition.

“A good blaze in the fireplace is what we want, though,” declared Phil. “No matter if it is warm, a fire will clear out the queer smell and draw good, fresh air in.” So he went in search of kindling while the others were unloading and carrying in the gasoline stove, the bedding and great quantities of baggage of all descriptions, not forgetting Paul Jones' hammock.

With four pairs of hands to help, the work

was soon done. Phil was ready to start his fire now, also, after a visit to the attic and the rooms on the second floor to make sure the chimney was sound and safe; but at this juncture came a suggestion from Billy that a brief inspection of the surroundings be made before the twilight grew deeper. It seemed a wise idea and the four began at once.

The boys' observations may be summed up in rather less time than they occupied in making them. The house was a fairly large, old-fashioned structure with fan-lights over the front door and beneath the gables at each side of the main structure. This part consisted of first and second floors only, and if there was an attic it was not finished or accessible. A one story and attic wing projected from the rear of the main building, ending in a large open shed for wood, garden tools and the like. This with the kitchen and one other room, which evidently had been used for storage purposes, made up the first floor of the wing section.

Two doors opened upon the side porch. One

led into the kitchen in the wing; the other into what had been both the dining-room and sitting-room, in the main building. In this apartment was the fireplace Phil planned to use.

A parlor and two other smaller apartments,—bedrooms at one time, no doubt—opened off the sitting-room. There was also a door into a hall extending through to the front of the house, another into the kitchen in the back, another to the cellar stairway, yet another which opened upon a large, dark closet. It was at the end of this little room that there rose a very steep flight of stairs to the low attic over the kitchen.

The stairway to the second floor of the main section was in the narrow hall and directly before the large front door. Upstairs were two small bed-rooms quite by themselves and two other rooms thrown together with only a wide arch between.

So much for the interior. Exterior observations were, in substance, that the dwelling stood on the west side of the road and about one hun-

dred feet back therefrom. No doubt the house had been painted at one time, but only in the lighter gray beneath the eaves and over the doors, in contrast with the weather-beaten wood color of the building in general, did any evidence of the fact remain.

Outside blinds or shutters, so frequently seen on the older country dwellings of the middle west, had never been used here; if so, they were long since gone. The windows, bare and cheerless, had, somehow, an almost ghostly appearance. The small panes were for the most part whole, but scarcely was there a window but contained one or more shattered ones, and these heightened that melancholy, half-ghostly effect just mentioned.

But perhaps the saddest part of the whole picture were the tall weeds, burdock particularly, which had taken possession of the beds where the peonies used to grow, fast crowding them out. The place for the hollyhocks, also, was now nearly submerged by the ugly, ranker growth.

Even along the picket fence, fast tumbling to decay, before the house, the tiger lilies were overgrown by clumps of young locusts. The rose bushes and lilacs that long ago must have delighted the passerby were now so straggling and forsaken as to suggest only wretchedness and neglect.

Still there were the tall old pines, a couple of large maples and some locust trees that gave the abandoned place a picturesque and interesting look. They stood strong and unchangeable. Perhaps they kept guard over the days when children built playhouses and made mud pies beneath their whispering boughs—when good old Grandfather Beaman himself nodded and fell asleep in his armchair in their grateful shade, all the pleasant Sunday afternoons of summer.

Now, to read all this may give quite a false impression. Everything that's here set down the Auto Boys saw; but perhaps they were not so deeply impressed by the melancholy of the surroundings as older persons would have been. True it is that they felt the least bit lonely, and

when a big farm wagon rattled by, they were glad. It helped remind them that there were people in plenty living all about—up the road and down the road, and in Middle Run village, only two miles away.

From the front yard the lads picked their way along the south side of the house—the drive in from the wagon road was at the north—and inspected the back yard. Here were grape vines and various fruit trees including pears, just nicely ripe. But here, also, the burdock, smartweed, ragweed and rank, coarse grass held full sway.

Just over another swaying, dilapidated picket fence was the garden. Barren and empty now, except for more weeds and a thick growth of blackberry bushes along the north side, it seemed the most forsaken spot of all until Billy made the discovery that the blackberry bushes bore fruit and plenty of it. Needless to say this announcement was received with hearty favor.

The fence at the foot of the garden had been of rails but some strong wind, or it may have

been strong hands, had torn it quite down. The rails still lay in the deep grass but scarcely one in its original position. It was a fine chance they offered for stubbed toes. Bright Eyes, minus shoes and stockings, made this discovery in a really painful way, as the explorers pushed their investigations to the old orchard beyond.

Ah! here was the place! Here, under the trees, the chance for Paul Jones' hammock! Here the spot for fishing and swimming, or just dreams and idleness!

For the river, clear and inviting, rippled upon its beach of sand, almost directly under a tree of ripe, red astrakhans.

"This *is* all hunky-dory!" Phil exclaimed vehemently, and slapped Dave MacLester resoundingly on the back in emphasis.

In general the others agreed with him. There was still much to see and many places to inspect—among them the old barn, a shed or two and a partially dismantled shop of some kind; but now the darkness was gathering fast and there was much to do inside to be in readiness

for the night. An hour or two, at most, in the morning would probably complete the inspection.

There would not be much ground to traverse. The dooryard, the garden, the old orchard and the buildings,—nothing else was left belonging to the place. A cornfield—the property of some neighbor, bordered the dooryard on the south, extending clear to the river, the western boundary of both. On the north, even close up to Grandfather Beaman's barn, was a pasture lot where other people's sheep and cattle were grazing now. Some cows at this very moment were lying beneath the clump of old cherry trees, just over the fence from the drive.

"You see," said Paul, as all turned toward the house, "it was the land to the south of the house, where that corn is, that everybody supposed belonged to my grandfather—about eighty acres of it. In the first place he owned all the ground north of the barn, and between the road and the river, clear to where the road crosses at the bridge beyond here. There were

some low, bad places, that were no account, I suppose, so he sold it. But say! I'm simply starved to death, that's what *I* am!" he broke off suddenly. "Let's hustle up some kind of banquet and I'll tell you all about this old ranch."

The hasty unloading of the auto had resulted in the piling of bedding, provisions and supplies in general in the utmost confusion upon the porch and in the sitting-room. To put all these things in some sort of temporary order, Paul and Bright Eyes set at once to work. Dave cranked the motor and made ready to run the car into the big, empty woodshed which, though it was entirely open at front, would furnish very fair shelter and be more convenient than the barn.

Billy Worth, as chief cook, occupied himself with the little gasoline stove and Phil kindled a cheerful blaze in the old fireplace. Later he and Dave lighted one of the oil lamps from the car and a common, little kitchen lamp which had been brought along. These helped still

further to dispel the gloom and give the big sitting-room quite a cheerful appearance.

A couple of hard-boiled eggs for each, coffee, an abundance of bread and butter, dried beef, cookies, cheese and an apple pie—the latter had been carried safely in its original tin—comprised the supper to which Chef Worth presently invited all hands. To say they responded promptly would certainly be no exaggeration.

The meal was served on a small, folding table and camp stools provided seats for four. Provision in this respect had not been made for a fifth member of the party. Although no one alluded to this fact, Master Bright Eyes was quick to notice it. For the first time he seemed to feel unpleasantly conscious of being a self-invited guest. Yet, even before this, he had been anxious, indeed, to win favor, and make amends for any inconvenience he caused. He always wanted to help with everything and be doing some little thing for some one or another of the boys quite constantly.

To the credit of the four chums it may be

said that, having taken the stranger in, they shared with him completely and equally in everything. And now, at supper, Phil Way insisted that he would rather sit on the soap box than "any wobbly, old camp stool," anyway. So he gave the latter to the little chap, then drew his own seat close beside. Like a big brother, and a very fond one, too, he saw to it that Bright Eyes was not for a moment overlooked, though for that matter the youngster was never at all bashful, nor yet unpleasantly forward.

Well, well! What a supper it was! Billy had to make a second big lot of coffee and the way the bread and butter disappeared was really wonderful, not to say positively mysterious. Then, when no one cared for one thing more, Dave and Phil made a regular Twentieth Century Limited job of the dish-washing while Paul Jones hunted up a means of hanging his much-abused hammock and Billy and the young stranger opened up the bale of quilts, blankets and pillows and made two not exactly downy

cots upon the bare floor of the living-room.

"Say, I'll sleep in the hammock, Jonesy, and divide things up so that Son, here, can bunk with Phil," unselfishly volunteered Dave Mac-Lester.

"So?" came the answer in questioning accent, while Paul went on working. He had found the old-time handle of the door to the kitchen suitable for one end of the hammock, and the other he was fastening to a low hook at the side of the brick fire-place. "Oh, you *will*, will you?" he added, a few seconds later, standing back to view his finished work.

"Don't you let him, Paul! He's been roasting you on that hammock since before we left home." This from Billy, who went on: "If you'd rather have one of the bunks, *I* can make out in the hammock all right."

"Couldn't think of it, Bill!" was the answer. "Awful good of you and all that, but it's such a bloomin' 'frowsy,' 'measley' old thing that I don't think anybody better have this hammock except P. Jones, Esquire. Unless"—he added,

in quite a different and very kindly tone—"unless young Stick-in-the-Mud, here, would rather sleep in it than bunk with Phil."

But Bright Eyes said he'd "ra'ler have le bed." And now, the question of sleeping accommodations having been satisfactorily arranged, the boys went out to the big flat stone, which constituted the floor of the little portico entrance at the front door, and there sat down in the cool and pleasant breeze of the summer evening.

By mutual consent this had been the time and place chosen, during supper, for the remainder of Paul's account of his grandfather's supposed ownership of more land than, at his death, he was found to possess; so Jones presently began quite where he had left off.

"I was saying that Grandfather Beaman did own once, but sold, the low land along the river north of us. Then he bought, or at any rate he was *supposed* to have bought, a half a quarter section, they call it,—eighty acres, anyway,—lying next south of him. And that's

where the trouble came in. He died and never a thing was found to show that he *had* bought that land. Everybody knew he had farmed it for ten years or more and even paid taxes on it; but never a sign of deed was there to be found and never a word of writing in any of the books of the county where you're expected to have all those things put down.

“Of course I don't know anything about it at all except what I've heard others tell, but goodness knows I've heard it all threshed over often enough! It happened at about the time I was a toddler. My father and mother had been dead about a year and sister Emma and I had been staying here with grandfather. She kept house for him and took care of me. Grandmother Beaman had been dead ever so long. I just remember grandfather—just remember that I used to live here.

“Well sir! when no deed for those eighty acres was found there was thunder to pay generally, for along comes Jonas Tagg, a regular 'tight-wad,' and the fellow that Grandfather

was supposed to have bought the land of. 'Oh, no, indeed,' says he. 'Nay, nay!' or words and figures to that effect. And he claimed that my grandfather had only rented the land and was away behind in the rent at that.

"He grabbed a big field of wheat that Grandfather had sowed and that he claimed for back rent and—well, that's all there is to it. With just the garden, and that little orchard, nobody could make a living here, so far from market and everything, and when sister married John Wilby they moved to Lannington and the old house has been empty ever since.

"I expect we'll see the Honorable J. Tagg and I'd like to tell him a few things; but I won't. 'Just let it go,' John Wilby says, and Emma—oh, she'd be wild if I ever said a word. Because Grandfather Beaman was peculiar. Never got over the wound he got in the war, the same time his leg was cut off. Tomorrow we'll dig around and see some of the queer things he did. Any old thing he wanted he could make. He made his own wooden leg. Honest, he did."

CHAPTER VIII

THE ANXIETY OF JONAS TAGG

There is nothing like a day in an automobile to make one ready for bed at night, and it was not very long after Paul concluded the story of Grandfather Beaman's unfortunate business methods that the boys turned in.

Billy Worth had simply said: "Well, I'm sure going to hunt the hay."

Phil Way responded: "That's the most rational thing I've heard from you for a long time, Billy."

Dave MacLester observed that, for his part, he could make the seven sleepers look wide awake as a baby with the colic.

Paul added, "Why, *I've* been asleep with one eye for the last half hour."

"Well, len, lay we *all* go to bed!" suggested the young stranger, with so tremendous a yawn that all the boys laughed. But it was his words

and, what meant more, perhaps, his actually rising and making a start that caused a general movement toward the old sitting-room.

Otherwise Billy would just naturally have lingered a little longer, waiting for some one else to stir first. Phil, Paul and Dave would have done the same. For, undoubtedly, it was pleasant in the soft, white light of the full moon there on the old doorstep; and undeniably quite an effort is necessary to pick one's self up and prepare for bed, under some circumstances, though the thought of sleep be very pleasant.

With a blanket for covering, Paul took possession of his hammock, from which he promptly announced that he "hadn't been so comfortable since he broke his leg"—an expression capable of such opposite interpretations that one might very well wonder just how to take it. This was the more particularly true when Paul Jones spoke the words,—he was so likely, at all times, to use whatever phrase came readily to his tongue at the moment, quite regardless of its being expressive of his meaning or otherwise.

Billy and Dave occupied one of the bunks made up on the floor, Phil and Little Mystery the other.

Young Mr. Worth had done quite a bit of chuckling to himself, during the past few days, in contemplation of the fun he would have with MacLester by pretending that he heard noises upstairs and down cellar, after the lights were out and they had gone to bed for their first night in the old house; but now the time had come he felt differently.

It surely did seem strange and queer lying there on a pretty hard bed, and on the floor, in this great, dark, empty house. It surely did seem as if there were little noises every now and then that had no good excuse for breaking in upon the silence of the calm, still night. Noises couldn't just make themselves, Billy was thinking; they had to be made by something.

But maybe it was only the cattle in the field close by that he heard. At any rate he wouldn't bother tonight to have a laugh on Dave, he reflected. Because he was just about as tired as

he ever wanted to be and everybody ought to get to sleep, to get up early in the morning, anyway.

And presently everybody *was* asleep. True, there was a lot of twisting and turning in the hammock before the occupant of that place of repose at last settled himself, and it is much to be suspected that "Mr. P. Jones, Esquire" found his bed less satisfactory than he pretended. However, in time he was quiet and the scarcely perceptible breeze that played through the wide-open windows made the only sound in the old house;—the only sound excepting the slow and regular breathing of the five who slept.

The little bed of coals in the fireplace glowed a deeper and deeper red and then grew dim. In some neighboring farmyard a rooster crowed once or twice, and now and again some lonely cricket chirped. So came the solemn hour of midnight; and so it passed, and if ghosts or other creatures of the darkness, real or fancied, were abroad, they came not near the dwelling

whose bleak, uncurtained windows reflected feebly the pale light of the waning moon.

What a different scene the morning presented! The sun was scarcely visible across the lately trimmed meadow, sloping gently back to some high wooded knolls to the east, when the Auto Boys were astir. Billy was up first and it may be stated plainly, and without possibility of contradiction, that from that moment sleep for any of the others was entirely out of the question. Not that the genial Mr. Worth would think of disturbing anyone's slumbers by rudely calling them to get up—most certainly not.

His friends might sleep on and on, if they wished, and *could*. All he did was pound on the tin dish-pan, using a big spoon and the handle of a bread-knife as drumsticks, while he sang "Please go 'way and let me sleep," or some such words, at the top of his voice.

"Great Scott! I hope I didn't wake any of you!" he exclaimed in the most apologetic tone, turning from the open door and pretending

the greatest astonishment upon discovering that his chums were getting up. "Since you are bound to crawl out *anyway*, what do you say to just a splash in the river, right off, now?"

What Paul had said, and what Dave had said a moment before, on the subject of being awakened, was not overly complimentary to Mr. Billy Worth, unless one may consider it pleasant to be termed a "young idiot;" but their sentiments concerning a quick dip, where the water rippled ever so invitingly upon its shore of sand, were more to his credit.

"Sure! We'll *all* go!" said Phil to Bright Eyes, wide awake instantly, and wanting to know if he, Phil, meant to join the others.

And they all did so, some of them with no more clothes than a single garment, and none of them, it may be said, in extremely conventional attire. But what matter? What's the use of a secluded place in the country, away from the crowds and the public, generally, if one gains no opportunity to let loose for a time the wild instincts of distant ancestors, whose

primitive customs are born in the blood through untold generations?

The water was fine, the river was finer. It was not a large stream—barely forty yards in width,—but so clear, and the bottom so firm and smooth, that a better place for swimming could not easily be imagined.

Of course one must go slowly until he had explored the depths somewhat, and knew the deeper and the shallow parts; knew where the snags or obstructions were—or, at least, were not. Yet this took only a little while.

Just opposite the tree of red astrakhans there was a wide sand bar where the current eddied and played delightfully, its greatest depth being not more than twelve inches or so. Just up stream from here was a broad, deep pool with high banks on both sides. One jutted over the water making a tiptop place for diving. Down river there were rocky obstructions in the stream's course and the channel became narrower; but at any point within view there was ample draught for boating and the temptation

to lose no time in building a canoe or a skiff came to all the boys.

Billy's "just a splash" lengthened into a good half-hour of fun before some one yelled, "Breakfast!" The word produced a skurrying to the house as if the sound were magic.

For use the night before, fresh water had been carried from the river, but Captain Phil put a ban upon a continuance of this practice, for drinking purposes, at least, as possibly dangerous; so Paul and Bright Eyes started with one large bucket and one small one to fetch both water and milk from a farmhouse a quarter of a mile beyond.

"And tell them we can mix the two ourselves," shouted Dave MacLester. "Now we're *in* the country, let's have milk,—the real thing and undiluted."

Billy and Phil got breakfast under way, meantime, and the bacon and eggs, fried potatoes and coffee were ready very soon after the two boys returned. The milk they brought was all that could be desired and showed so rich in the coffee

that Dave declared it would be called nothing short of cream in Lannington.

All things, indeed, tended to make the first morning meal of the lads' own preparation truly enjoyable. Thus, comfortable both physically and mentally, it was with the most pleasurable anticipations that the chums contemplated the days which seemed to lie so tranquil and so care-free on before them.

Paul had much to tell over the breakfast table about the questions asked by members of the household where he and Bright Eyes had gone for the milk. Mrs. Wilby had often spoken of these people, whose name was Fifer. Paul had told them freely that he and his friends were come to the Beaman place just for an outing. They, in turn, were quite pleasant and friendly. Particularly did they seem disposed to be agreeable when they learned who Paul was, for all remembered him as a baby and, of course, had known his sister very well.

One question Mr. Fifer asked was whether the visitors had means of showing themselves

entitled to occupy the old house. For it appeared, he said, that Jonas Tagg, living a half-mile distant, in the opposite direction from the Beaman property, had taken it upon himself to regard the place quite as his own. He might even order the boys away if they could not show proper credentials.

"I'd like to see him do it though!" was the rather war-like comment of young Mr. Jones, as he mentioned the possibility of such action on part of the aforesaid Tagg.

However, it happened that Paul was not present when the old fellow arrived upon the scene, for arrive he did, and but very little later.

Down past the Fifer place, thence across the river and up over a long rise of ground beyond lay the little town of Middle Run. Thither Billy, Dave and Paul went in the auto, some time after breakfast was over, taking with them letters to be mailed home telling—briefly enough, if the truth were known—of the pleasant trip and safe arrival at the Beaman place. Certain provisions were also to be obtained and

arrangements made for receiving their own mail at the Middle Run post-office.

A further matter of pressing importance pertained to the league base ball scores of the previous day; for, though far removed from the scenes of the games, the young gentlemen had no thought of losing interest in the standing of the favorite team. If city papers could not be bought in the little town, a subscription for one of them must be forwarded at once.

In this manner, then, did it happen that Phil Way and the Boy were left alone for a time. The two were seated on the shady old porch at the rear of the sitting-room, discussing the desirability of hunting up some straw or hay as a means of improving their bed, when the sound of footsteps coming directly through the house from the front door fell upon their ears.

Considerably startled, Phil sprang up. Looking in, he saw a roughly dressed, sour-visaged man scrutinizing not very pleasantly the house-keeping equipment so lately installed. Quickly finding himself observed, the caller smiled in a

way intended to be pleasant, no doubt, but reminding Phil of nothing so much as a picture he had once seen of a laughing hyena.

"Mornin'," said the man. "Look's ez ef yuh'd come to stay."

"Yes, a couple of weeks or so," was the answer, and as the visitor seemed to try to speak pleasantly, Way did likewise.

"Heerd ye was here. Some of the Beamans, Fifer's girl said. Fifer lives jest down the road a spell. Met her up near my place jest ez I was comin' over here to hunt ye up."

"Mr. Beaman was Paul Jones' grandfather. Maybe you remember Paul. He's with us and he's a Beaman, of course, but the others of us are just friends of his."

"Uh-m!" answered the visitor, looking around pretty sharply again at the contents of the sitting-room, then at Phil and the Boy. The latter looked in turn at him and, judging by the expression upon his face and in his deep, deep eyes, the little lad was forming no very flattering opinion of the caller.

"'Tain't a good place for you boys to be, I swore, it ain't," the man observed gloomily, after a few seconds of silence.

"Oh, I think we'll be pretty comfortable, especially when we get squared around a bit," Phil responded. "You see we came just last night and are hardly settled yet."

"Uh-m." This acknowledgment—it was just a sort of deep gurgling sound he made without opening his thin, tight-shut lips—the stranger followed soon with the information that his own name was Tagg, that he lived "jest up the road a spell—first house on the right-hand side." Perhaps the boys had noticed the barn with one door blown down, as they passed. If they had, that was his place.

From the first Phil had been quite sure the caller was none other than the very individual he now announced himself to be. The probability that the old fellow would be troublesome was foremost in his thoughts. However, the story of Grandfather Beaman and the description of Mr. Tagg, as furnished by Paul Jones,

did not quite tally with the man's manner, though they did fit his appearance.

Even with the most careful regard for the truth it can be said that there are more agreeable, better looking people in the world than was Mr. Jonas Tagg. He was anywhere between the age of sixty-five and eighty years, judged by his appearance. His iron gray hair was long and hung like a shaggy, and not very clean, mane about his ears and neck. A short, stubby beard bristled over the lower part of his face but his upper lip shaved—or rather had been shaved a fortnight ago.

Mr. Tagg's eyes were watery and of a watery color; very small but very crafty; and even when he tried to give himself an amiable appearance, as undoubtedly he did this morning, it would have required a very powerful microscope to have discovered truth or honor in them. Maybe it was the watery character of the old fellow's eyes that gave to his large, sharp nose a similar weakness. He seemed always on the

verge of having extreme need of a handkerchief.

Attired in rubber boots, (the legs of which were so encrusted with mud and dirt they looked as if a kind of bark had grown over them) faded blue overalls, a faded gingham shirt and an extremely ragged and equally dirty coat, once black, now faded a rusty green, Mr. Tagg was really not the most attractive person in creation.

"We want to get acquainted with all the neighbors," Phil Way answered to the visitor's introduction of himself. Then he told his own name and the names of his three chums. "This is our mascot," he said, indicating Bright Eyes. The latter had been casting many covert glances at Mr. Tagg, but now looked squarely up at him, his expression plainly showing that he was not immeasurably rejoiced at the meeting.

"Now, that's nice," Mr. Tagg returned, and took a pinch of tobacco from a bit of dirty paper in his pocket. He seemed to measure the quantity in a miserly way with his watery eyes.

“That’s good,” he went on, his reference being not to the tobacco, but the desire of the boys to get acquainted. “An’ as a matter er fact, it’s because I jest natchly want to be neighborly that I come down here to see ye. An’, confidential, I jest am goin’ to say that this ol’ house ain’t no place for you boys to be. But I ’low ye’ve come to have a good time in the country an’ ye hadn’t ought to be disappointed. What d’ye say to stayin’ in the sugar house in my woods, instead? River’s right handy an’ ye can run yer horseless carriage right back through the lane, jest so’s ye keep the pastur’ bars shet. Confidential, ye know, an’ perticklerly so, as to the neighbors here, I kin say I know this here house ain’t no place for you young men to be. It ain’t safe.”

“I’m sure it’s kind of you, Mr. Tagg,—very kind,” Phil replied, wondering what possible danger the old fellow had in mind. “But the house really appears to be dry and clean and we’ve aired it, too. Of course the well here may

be bad, for want of use, but we're going to carry water from Mr. Fifer's."

"It ain't that," the old man answered, shaking his head mysteriously. "It's enough more'n that, *I* kin tell ye. Jest you boys take me up on that offer of the sugar house fer yer campin' out, an' ye'll be wise and glad—" he repeated as if reluctant to say more. But in another moment he beckoned Phil into the house, whispered a few words hastily, then took his departure, tramping heavily out through the hall and the front door.

CHAPTER IX

AN INTERESTING DISCOVERY

Phil Way watched Mr. Tagg out through the rickety front gate to the road. "Funny thing!" he ejaculated; not that he meant just what he said, but rather that he considered something—what the old farmer had said to him, probably,—as being both extraordinary and doubtful. However, he returned directly to the porch and sat down beside the Boy.

"What it is? What it a funny ling?" asked Bright Eyes, curiously.

"Funny that Brother Tagg wants us to move to his sugar camp, Jack. But we can talk about that when the fellows come back. I want to talk to you now about something else."

The Boy's countenance grew serious at once but he made no reply.

"Once again, Jack," Phil went on, "I'm going to ask you your name and where your

home is and let you show me, as I know, of course, you can, that you have a good reason for—for being where you are. You know I found something yesterday—something that fell out of your old clothes. It was the last thing anybody would have expected to find in them, and that was a tooth brush. It shows me, Jack, that you aren't the tramp you'd be willing we should believe. It makes me think that somewhere there's somebody that would give a lot, I'll bet, just to see somebody else."

"Are there a good many mills in Lannington, where you live?" the boy inquired, looking away off across the fields, very soberly and seriously, but no more answering directly to Phil's words than if he had not heard.

"Sure there are plenty of factories," Way replied, "but what has that to do with you?"

"I think I can get a place to work here, maybe," the youngster responded, with determination. "Lo, if I can, I'll come and see you sometime. I'll have to have a name, if I work for some-

body, lo I'll tell you what my name it. It it Frank Lantern."

The half-innocent, half-audacious expression in his handsome, clear-cut face as the Boy glanced cautiously up to note the effect of his statement, would have made the fortune of an artist. But Phil did not like it and was not a little impatient over the words preceding it.

"I hate a liar," he said bluntly.

To this there was no response. The Boy again looked far off across the fields and his face, now expressive of both misery and almost fierce determination, was again a study.

"Lat right," he said at last. "Lat it not my name. But I have no oler. I have no name at all. I have no home at all. Lat it all I can tell anybody."

"That was *your* tooth brush, Jack?" said Phil kindly, but seriously.

A nod was the only answer.

"And the clothes we first found you in were not your own clothes?" the older lad went on in the voice of a big brother.

There was not so much as a nod in response to this. Phil waited for some time before continuing. Then he said:

“You see we like you, Jack—all of us,—and we are willing to believe you have your own good reasons for telling nothing at all about yourself. Still, it puts us in a bad position and—well, don’t you see that it isn’t because we’re curious or want to put our noses into somebody else’s business? Gosh! Everybody’s got to act at least sensible!”

This last expression showed the speaker to be really quite exasperated and fast losing patience.

“Here come the fellows, now!” Way broke in suddenly as the familiar honk-honk of the Thirty came to his ears; but Bright Eyes, still proudly defiant, was turning quickly into the house as if to get into his old clothes forthwith. “Never mind, Jack! Come along here, old man, and stop looking that way. We’ll just have to take you as you are, I see that.”

Then Phil ran to the road to greet Billy, Paul

and Dave and more slowly, and still very soberly, the Boy followed.

The fervor of the boys' greetings, as the automobile came to a halt under one of the giant cherry trees, might have caused a stranger to suppose the friends had been separated by weeks of time instead of for an hour or two. Yet it must be understood there *was* much of interest to be told immediately, to say nothing of the defeat of the favorite league team in yesterday's game, as duly set forth in the morning paper, to be discussed. Why, the opposition had simply made shredded codfish of that new pitcher! What a shame! Where was Twirler, the invincible? What was the management thinking of, anyway?

Further news brought from Middle Run, which was *not* in the morning paper there purchased, however, was the fact that Sam Carew was in the village. Paul had seen him on the street for just a moment and, forgetting dislike of the fellow in his pleasure at seeing *anyone* from home, yelled, "Hello!" cheerily enough.

Sam's response was none too amiable, but he was naturally sulky after the humiliation he suffered for his connection with the Star Lake club. Not a great deal could be expected, perhaps.

Phil insisted now, as he had done earlier, that Sam should have every chance to show an agreeable disposition; and as all found something more pleasant than otherwise in the thought of frequently seeing some one from their own town, no objection to Captain Way's plan of action was set forth. So ended, for the time, the discussion of Paul's meeting with Carew. Other subjects having been likewise disposed of, Phil quietly mentioned that Mr. Tagg had been around to pay his respects.

Quite as Way expected, the announcement aroused vast interest at once. Much speculation concerning the seemingly friendly attitude shown by the neighbor followed when Billy, Dave and Paul had learned all about his visit and the talk which had taken place.

But no, not *all* about his visit! One thing

Phil omitted—the words the old man spoke to him alone just before leaving. His reasons for this were, first of all, Master Bright Eyes. Secondly, that he wanted yet a little time to consider in his own mind, alone, whether it were not better to keep this part of Mr. Tagg's conversation entirely to himself; not only on account of the Boy, but in the interest of good, common sense generally.

“Shoot it! We don't want to fiddle away any time on his old sugar house!” Billy ejaculated. And, although it must be admitted that young Mr. Worth had no information whatever concerning the age of the building mentioned, and although it may be stated, also, that Mr. Tagg's invitation made no reference to time being occupied with musical instruments of any kind, the facts are that Mr. William Worth voiced the sentiments of his friends very completely in thus expressing his own.

“Still,” reasoned Phil, “we might go and look over his woods and the sugar camp. 'Twill

do no harm and we want to be decently polite.”

“Till we see what sort of an axe our friend has to grind—see if he really wants to be friendly or is just scheming to get us down there for some reason we don’t know,” Dave added.

“That’s the system!” Billy put in. “We’ll just let him think we don’t suspect any false moves on his part. Then if it turns out that he’s playing fair, we’ll be glad of it; and if it’s some caper that he’s up to, why, we’ll have our eyes open.”

To report all that was said with reference to this and many other of the more important subjects of discussion, as from time to time they presented themselves, cannot of course be done. Every one of the chums had always much to say and Bright Eyes, too, frequently volunteered comment and suggestions.

His odd substitution of *L* or *T* for *S* or *Th* and equivalent sounds made his soft, pleasing voice only the more winsome. His remarks,

also, were often quaintly wise and that he could think capably and develop in his mind plans for work and for play, clever beyond his years, soon became apparent even to his four friends' notice, not especially intent upon such observations, as a rule.

However, with regard to Mr. Tagg, as well as other matters, the portions of conversation herein set down are, or should be, sufficient to show how the friends regarded each and all. So will the causes and the motives which shaped their course and led them into and out of their adventures, their fortunes and their misfortunes be apparent. And certainly more would be neither practicable nor desirable. What odds, for instance, how many times Paul Jones exclaimed, "Whatever can he be up to now?" as Jonas Tagg's visit was discussed?

And there you are! And here the Auto Boys are, deciding in much less time than required to tell it, to spend the remainder of the morning exploring the empty weather-beaten barn and in searching out some of the curious contriv-

ances built by Grandfather Beaman there and elsewhere.

"He made a mouse-proof grain bin with a kind of mortar-like cement that he knew how to mix up. It was before real cement work was so common everywhere, as now, and he called it stone," said Paul Jones, reaching up to the heavy wooden bar with which the barn door was closed. "But whatever's the matter with this latch?" he added, fumbling with the bar, but failing to get the door open.

It was just one of the departed Mr. Beaman's odd contrivances. The latch was held down by a block of wood hung perpendicularly above it and which must be pushed aside before the latch itself could be released.

A musty, moldy odor greeted the boys as they stepped inside the building. Their eyes fell upon a scene of many cobwebs and much dust, the collections of long years, through which these and the mice and spiders had had undisputed possession. But all about were evidences of Grandfather Beaman's odd ingenuity,

or of his partially shattered mind. It would have been difficult, perhaps, to determine which.

Here, on the main barn floor, were weights and pulleys by which with little effort he had lifted his wagon entirely off the floor when he wanted to grease it, instead of jacking up one wheel at a time. The same device, with fewer weights, served to lift the box off the wagon or help him to put the hayrack on, as he chose, or his needs required.

Instead of a stairway or ordinary ladder, by which to reach the hay loft, he had a crude hand elevator hung in a wide chute. So balanced was it with heavy cubes of home-made cement, or "stone," as he would have called the blocks, that with little effort he had raised himself to the loft or let himself down again.

After inspection of this elaborate arrangement, it was a surprise to find the stairway to the barn's basement in a most dilapidated state. So steep was it, too, that the boys climbed down one at a time quite gingerly. Last of all went Bright Eyes. He heard Paul shout, "Say, look

at this queer thing!" as he was midway between the floor above and the floor below. Forgetting that he had other things of more importance to observe at just that time he looked toward Paul, put his foot on a loose step and tumbled head first to the bottom of the stairs.

He laughed as he picked himself up, exclaiming, "How can I ever lee two lingt at le lame time?" And then, "Lat it jut le way I tumbled down tairt at home—or I don't mean—lat it, at a hout where I wat taying one time."

So great was the little lad's confusion at this inadvertent mention of a subject to which he never referred—his home—that he colored red as a poppy. He only made his friends the more curious, though, by adding, to divert them quickly to another subject, as often he had sought to do before, "I get lit it where ley ute to keep le cowl."

However, the youngster's observation was correct. The cows had been stabled in the basement and a curious place it was. Instead of stanchions there were square blocks of cement,

or stone, with a short chain built into each. A hook, closing with a spring snap, in the free end of each chain suggested that the cows had been fastened by means of straps around the necks of the animals. It was one of these to which Paul had called attention as being "queer."

Here, as everywhere, the dust lay deep and the cobwebs over the tiny windows, where the panes were not shattered or gone entirely, hung a thick, heavy gray.

To admit more light, as well as air, a stable door was opened and then the boys discovered the mouse-proof grain bin of cement work of which Paul had heard his sister tell. It was a ponderous affair, built against the stone wall of the basement, and at one end of the central space between the two rows of stables.

Long empty, the dark interior of the bin or great box gave forth an odor of unwholesomeness and decay, as together Billy and Paul lifted up the heavy lid. "Gee! I wouldn't want to be cooped up in there!" Jones ejaculated. "But there's room

enough! Dandy place to hide if ever we should be playing 'I Spy' here. See that the cover doesn't come down on me, now!" and with these words he sprang inside.

Six feet long, perhaps four feet wide and as many deep, the bin gave Paul abundant room to move about. Even with the heavy lid closed down he would have been able to do all but stand upright. Yet he was glad to clamber out of the box, much faster than he had climbed in, when Dave proposed letting the cover down on him just to see how it would seem.

At the side of the barn opposite the stable for the cows were stalls for three horses. There was a sort of rough cupboard, or cabinet, built out from the wall at the rear of the stalls, but it seemed to contain nothing save a musty curry comb, a few old harness buckles and odd pieces of leather and straps. The latter lay in a small, lower drawer quite by themselves.

"Some of this stuff might come in handy in our tool box," said Paul, and with both hands gathered up the entire assortment.

"No, bring the drawer and all over here to the light," Phil suggested.

So, taking the drawer out, Paul carried it to the open door. One piece of leather which would in a pinch do for washers, perhaps, was selected and Billy picked the drawer up to restore it to place. As he was about to slip it into the cabinet, he thought it seemed short. The drawer was not so deep, from front to back, as was the cabinet itself. Paul was with Worth, the others having remained in the open doorway, and the latter called attention to his discovery.

"Golly Neds! I'd just *like* to find a secret drawer somewhere! Even if there wasn't a hill of beans in it, I'd like to find one!" exclaimed Jones, the lively interest every mortal has in anything mysterious firing his imagination at once. "Let's see if the other drawers are the same."

One after another the six little boxes were opened. All were of equal length.

"Hold on a minute, though!" exclaimed Billy,

and reaching into the space from which the drawer containing the straps and leather was removed, he managed to get hold of what seemed like a loose panel in the back of the cabinet with his finger tips. With astonishment and interest he drew it toward him.

“It is a drawer!” he exclaimed exultingly.
“A secret drawer back of the regular one!”

CHAPTER X

THE INSCRIPTION NONE COULD DECIPHER

Billy Worth was right. His shout, "A secret drawer!" brought Phil, Dave and Bright Eyes from the doorway in a hurry. But the excitement was for the most part quickly over. Not a thing did the little box, so cleverly hidden in the crude cabinet, contain but a small package of tobacco.

Perhaps Grandfather Beaman, afraid of sometime finding himself without fuel for his pipe, had contrived this means of keeping a small supply in reserve. That it was concealed so carefully was just one of his eccentricities, it is likely, for there was no one to say he should not have tobacco if he liked, and that he smoked and even had the old-fashioned, but none the less vile, habit of chewing, was well known.

However, if the contents of the secret drawer were a disappointment to the Auto Boys, and

such undoubtedly was the fact, the discovery served, nevertheless, to stir to fever height in them a desire to look further in hope of finding something more remarkable or in some way worth while.

One by one they looked back of all the other drawers in the rough stable cabinet; but the panels were tight, and by taking all out at one time they satisfied themselves that no second secret box was concealed there.

“We’ll just rummage the whole old place from top to bottom!” declared Paul Jones, his eyes still glistening. “What if we’d find the money Grandfather Beaman got for that land he sold? No one knows what he did with it! Everybody thought he used it to buy that property that old Tagg stepped in and claimed.”

“Oh, what if you’d find a last year’s bird-nest!” MacLester replied, after his usual manner of dashing cold water on excessive enthusiasm. “I’ll bet that’s all you *will* find, too.”

“What of it? It’s good fun and exciting, too, just to nose around for something—no telling

what," Billy Worth chimed in, and his view of the matter was the general one. Even Dave would not willingly have given up further exploring. He was just a little pessimistic by disposition and, from force of habit, expressed himself in such a manner.

A thorough search of the barn revealed nothing of more than passing interest, although the remainder of the morning was devoted to the purpose. Very dirty from contact with the dust and cobwebs, the five boys gave up their hunting at last, and raced pell-mell to the river again for a swim and a cleaning up, these operations being very pleasantly combined, in preparation for dinner.

The water was even finer than before, if that were possible. The air was warmer, too, and the bright, August sun shone down most delightfully upon bare backs whose owners perched like frogs at the river's margin, catching their breaths between feats of aquatic skill.

From down the river and a quarter of a mile or more distant came the sharp rattle of a pneu-

matic hammer. Although the work in progress was concealed by trees and the bending of the stream, the boys knew that a railroad bridge was in course of erection. A large steam road was being straightened and a new grade established in the vicinity. They had noticed the work on their trip out as they passed along where the railway nearly paralleled the wagon road for a little distance.

To go over and see the big new bridge, the noisy hammers and the men at work, at the first convenient opportunity, the boys promised themselves while dressing after their swim. But it could not be today. They were too keen to find more secret compartments in old cabinets, hidden chests in dark cellar corners, or who could tell what might not be discovered? So they trotted briskly to the old house and all fell to under Billy Worth's capable direction to prepare dinner.

A juicy steak, brought that morning from Middle Run, was the main item of the noonday meal and the repast was soon ready. In a space

of time far shorter than would sound well, if mentioned, the dinner was eaten.

“Now, then,” said Paul Jones, “let’s see what else we can find! And, say, I know! Let’s see if we can find Grandfather Beaman’s wooden leg and have a look at the mysterious marks he made on it! Come along with me, somebody. It’s up in the kitchen attic!”

“Say, I don’t believe I’d bother with that now,” Phil Way suggested, and his tone was quite serious. “Wait till some day it rains, or something, and we can’t get out!”

But by this time Paul and Billy were half way up the steep stairway to the low loft over the kitchen. Very reluctantly Phil followed and Bright Eyes and Dave brought up the rear.

The room to which the boys thus ascended was low and dark. The roof sloped almost to the attic floor at either side. The floor, however, consisted of only loose boards, laid upon the joists, and they clattered noisily under the visitors’ feet. Scores of wasps’ nests adorned the low

rafters and the sharp buzz of the builders thereof made the intruders cautious.

"Pshaw! They won't sting if you don't bother 'em!" quoth Billy Worth; but his very guarded tone indicated he had his doubts.

"That's so, Bill! You know that and so do I. It's in the books. But can the confounded wasps and hornets read?" growled Paul Jones in a half whisper, charily picking his way toward the gable window.

By degrees the boys' eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness. They made out a number of objects which invited investigation. One was an old-fashioned leather trunk containing a quantity of magazines and story papers, all more or less ragged and yellow with age. Near the chimney, which mounted through the roof at the center of the loft, was an ancient bureau, but even a hasty inspection proved it to contain nothing of greater value than two tin candlesticks and a shoemaker's last.

"There's something in here," Dave called softly, and stooping low, drew from the dark-

ness, close to the eaves, a black box, the marks on which suggested that it had at sometime been a light shipping case for tea. "Caesar's ghost!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Here it is now!"

Not the ghost of the great Roman was it that Dave had found; not at all, but he had discovered the object of the present search—nothing less, in fact, than the cumbersome leg of wood which, long ago, Benjamin Beaman, volunteer in his country's service and the Union's cause, had carved out for himself in lieu of the better one he left on the field of battle.

The artificial limb reposed in the old tea chest together with an array of straps, now dry and stiff almost to being brittle, which had apparently been employed by the wearer to fasten it on. There was also a leather boot in the box. It had been used, evidently, on only those special occasions when the wooden leg was worn, and so had long survived its mate, its owner and its own usefulness.

"That is it, sure!" cried Paul, entirely for-

getting the wasps in the intensity of his interest.

“Let’s get it downstairs to look it over!”

“And here’s your grandfather’s cane and his crutch, Paul!” said Phil Way, almost reverently. He had just discovered the articles named hanging on the dark side of the big chimney. “Let’s not disturb them,” he added. “I don’t see much sense in such rummaging around, myself; and to be honest, it doesn’t seem just exactly decent.”

Was Phil thinking of the whispered words of Jonas Tagg? Or was it only a certain respect for the memory of him who had lived so long here in the old house they were so cheerfully occupying that made him unwilling to lay ruthless hands upon the property of the departed? Perhaps ’twas a little of both. At any rate the genuine remonstrance and regret in his tone, even more than his words, attracted the notice of all the boys.

“Why, we aren’t hurting anything!” replied Paul, vigorously. “My sister said we could dig around to our hearts’ content, in the house, or

out of it. We don't think any the less of Grandfather Beaman for it! Sure we don't! He'd be the first to say 'go ahead' if he should step in here this minute."

"Which I very particularly hope he won't," muttered Dave MacLester to himself.

The return march downstairs had been in progress during this conversation and a few seconds later the five boys were bending over the artificial limb. They carried it to the bright light of out-of-doors. Intently they studied the strange array of numbers burned roughly and irregularly on one side of the wood, substantially as follows:

7809 9407841879969

How little likely it was that they could find a hidden meaning in the queer characters after scores of older heads had failed bothered the Auto Boys not at all. Right side up and wrong

side up they read the numbers through and through, again and again. Their efforts were lost.

“If we had just one thing as a clue—just one little thing to guide us!” said Paul longingly.

“Or if we *knew* the crazy marks had any special meaning *in* them!” Dave ejaculated discouragingly. “And I, for one, don’t believe they have, either,” he added, as if his mind were very definitely and decidedly made up on that point.

“Looks as if Dave were right, at that!” Billy Worth added. “But wait a minute! By hokey! I know what! Maybe the wood is hollow. Where’s a stick or something?” he called excitedly. “If it *is* hollow we can mighty soon tell by tapping it!”

Bright Eyes, alert and eager to be of use, quickly brought a base ball bat from the fireplace corner. With Paul holding the artificial limb clear of the floor, and all the boys leaning close with ears strained, the youngster gently tapped the wooden leg. Again and again he

did so from the tip of toe to knee, which marked its total length. No hollow sound could be observed. Unmistakably, indeed, the wood rang sound and solid as any block of sound and solid wood could do.

"I tell you there's nothing to it," Dave MacLester again declared.

"Dave may be right, or he may be wrong, fellows," said Phil, quietly, "but honestly, I can't see the use of spending any more time over it now. Besides, I want to get out in the car, somewhere. Let's see something of the country around here."

"Put it away, Skeezecks. Put it in the chimney corner. We'll have another look one of these days."

This command to Bright Eyes came from Paul, fast learning, as were his friends as well, for that matter, to let the willing little stranger be just as helpful as he wished. In fact, it is considerably to be feared that in time the youngster's amiable, willing disposition might have been quite imposed upon had fortune

willed that he remain a member of the party indefinitely.

“Well, who’s going to take a jaunt over to Middle Run—or somewhere?” persisted Phil, apparently anxious to take a ride, but more anxious, if the truth were known, to have an opportunity of conversing with one or all of the other boys when Bright Eyes was not near. “You and Dave come along, Billy! Paul and Jack can stay behind and just sort of look after things at home a bit, if they want to.”

“Sure! Go on, I don’t care. We don’t either of us care, do we, Dudley?” Paul answered.

He often called the Boy by the first name that popped into his mind. Perhaps, consciously or unconsciously, he imitated Uncle Joe Brush, who in “The Auto Boys,” it will be remembered, had a different name for his handy man each time he wanted him.

“Lertainly! I get we can take care of ourlelt and maybe find lat money before ley get back. Wouldn’t lat be fine?”

Needless to say Master Bright Eyes was the

speaker. Assent being thus readily given, the Thirty, with Phil at the wheel and Dave and Billy in the tonneau, presently rolled easily out of the grass-grown drive and in the direction of Middle Run.

Left together Paul and Master Mystery soon arrived at a plan to try for fish in some of the small, deep pools above the swimming hole in the river. They found angleworms where the ground was still moist, beneath the thick bed of chips near the woodshed, and were very merry as they worked together. True, Paul's sharp tongue made the younger and far more sensitive boy wince occasionally today, as it had done many times before; but he pretended he did not mind.

Happy and contented, the two strolled through the abandoned garden, into the orchard and the fields to the north where gentle breezes whispered across the old pasture and rustled in the masses of lowland undergrowth beyond. Away to the west the tree-decked hills rose boldly as the walls of some monstrous fort.

In every direction were deep green shades of midsummer, save where the golden-rod was coming into a profusion of yellow along the fences. It was a day to make one love the country and wish never to leave it.

Phil and Billy and Dave felt the all-pervading influence of the fine air as the narrow country road slipped rapidly behind them. With quiet, certain ability their car kept its even pace, climbing steadily up the grade to the village beyond, as if hill-climbing were no test of power at all.

"I'm going to write and mail a letter," called Way, over his shoulder. "You know the tooth brush I picked up when it fell out of that little chap's old clothes? Well, I put it straight before him this morning that the brush was his originally and the clothes were not. He wouldn't deny anything but he wouldn't tell anything, except he tried to put me off with some name for himself he made up. He thinks he'd like to get a job in Lannington."

"Yes, he told me so," Billy put in. "But

what's that got to do with your writing a letter?"

"Oh, yes! I was going to say," Phil went on, one eye on the road, and with the other seeming to try to look backwards, "I'm going to find out, if I can, where there's a town having a Ninth and One-Half street. Who ever heard of such a thing? But just the same the firm that made or sold that tooth brush is 'F. & S., 27 Ninth and One-Half Street.' "

"Hump! Guess you could write a good many letters before you'd happen to hit the right town!" observed Dave, coolly, yet with interest, too.

"Don't you think it! I'll find the town out with one letter," declared Phil confidently.

"Tell us how," demanded Worth, after a minute or two of fruitless thought.

"I'll write to the Dead Letter Office in Washington," came the answer. "They know every queerly named street of any importance every place. They have stacks of different city directories to help them get missent mail rightly de-

livered, and all such things. You can just bank on it that they'd know where there's an oddity like anything and a half street without having to stop to look it up—at least if it's a street of any account, and in a town big enough to have the streets numbered, which, of course this one must be."

"Gee! That's a fine idea!" Billy Worth said. Immediately he was enthusiastic. Immediately he had visions of learning the town whence their mysterious little friend had come, at least. But neither he nor Dave guessed until Phil told them how easily such knowledge could be used to further advantage.

"We'll get the name of the town, you see," said Phil, "Then write to 'F. & S.' at the street and number on the brush. We will ask them what information they can give about a boy having disappeared,—stolen, run off, or anything of the kind, from their city, and, presumably, from the family of one of their customers. See the point? Well, we ought to get track of something that way, but to help further

we can write to the mayor of the town, or somebody."

"One sure thing is that that young shaver is not the gypsy kind he'd like to have us think," Dave MacLester reflected aloud.

"No he's not and he's a long way from it. I'm satisfied of that," Way responded. "It does seem to stand to reason, though, that he must belong somewhere in this section—maybe not more than fifty or a hundred miles away. If we'd find out that Ninth and a Half street is in some town near here we'd just skip over there for a day. Maybe we could go in the car—and see what we could find out, in a quiet way, without anyone knowing what we were after."

"I'd like to do it, Phil," said Billy very earnestly. "Blamed if I don't think there's history back of our finding that young 'un in the road that would surprise us!"

CHAPTER XI

A SMALL PUNCTURE AND A LARGE DISTURBANCE

Phil Way had not yet told of the words Jonas Tagg had whispered, much as they occupied his thoughts, when the Auto Boys were ready to leave Middle Run.

They had written and posted the letter of inquiry to the Dead Letter division of the Post Office department in Washington, with regard to the location of Ninth and One-Half street. They had purchased several sorts of preserved provisions to have in store against rainy days when they would not wish to leave the old farmhouse. Also, they had struck up what seemed a pleasant acquaintance with "Spike" Marble, a very tall and slim young gentleman—whence his name, no doubt,—of about Phil's age, who waited on them in the grocery.

Young Mr. Marble was a base ball enthusi-

ast,—although that is not the word Paul Jones would have used—and it was his propensity to discuss affairs of the diamond with anyone willing to talk of them that immediately ripened into the acquaintance mentioned.

“Don’t want to brag none, but we play a pretty good article of ball right here at the Run,” said this youthful exponent of the national game, wrapping up “fifteen cents’ worth” of herring, and throwing in an extra one for the sake of the fellowship in his favorite subject. “Come over about Friday afternoon and you’ll see us trim the Wilton bunch twenty ways for Sunday. And that’s going some, too, because they’ve beat every township around here except us and they *have* got a great pitcher.”

“Don’t s’pose you’d ever think of a ringer, but if you ever want one you’ll find a good man for the box right here.”

This, from Worth, caused Dave MacLester to flush up quite noticeably.

“Soft pedal there,” he growled, quite unin-

tentionally revealing that it was he to whom Worth's laudatory remark referred.

Spike Marble pricked up his ears figuratively and perhaps literally. They were large ears, to say the least, and any sudden movement of their owner's sleekly combed hair gave them a motion of their own. They were more like the ears of an elephant than of a horse, however, so far as pricking up was concerned, and maybe their movement should not be called that at all. Fortunately it doesn't matter.

Spike showed his interest, at any rate. He was glad to know where he could put hands on a pitcher for the Middle Run team, for, while he had one good one, it was a weakness to have nothing first-class in reserve. He promised to let his new friends know just when the Wiltonites were to meet their Waterloo, as soon as the date could be definitely announced.

Thus the Auto Boys returned to their car and, Phil suggesting that they give a lot of the youngsters gathered around it a little ride, the same was done and there could be no doubt

from that moment that there would be a welcome for the Thirty's owners in Middle Run whenever they chanced to be there. Then by a longer, but new route, rather than the direct road, the three boys turned the machine toward the Old Beaman place and Paul and Bright Eyes whom they pictured impatiently awaiting them.

Billy and Dave found much to talk about in the prospective base ball game. Phil was quiet,—even unusually so. Jonas Tagg's parting words were still in his thoughts and they annoyed him more and more as the day waned. It had been his resolve originally to repeat the old farmer's secret communication to no one. Now he considered that by this course he took upon himself a greater personal responsibility than was necessary, or even desirable.

Billy Worth had shown himself not likely to be easily alarmed by strange noises about the old house, usually so grim and silent, so why not confide in him, Phil reasoned? And, coming presently to the opinion that he should and

must do so, and yet not alarm Dave, he laid his plans accordingly.

The homeward road the boys had taken was much the longer one between Middle Run and the old farmhouse, but much the better one, also. It avoided the hills. The course brought them out well south upon the thoroughfare upon which the Beaman place was situated, and they had to pass Mr. Tagg's farm to reach home. Phil scarcely liked this. He did not want Mac-Lester to meet this particular neighbor.

However, there was little danger, for Dave was improving the smooth stretch of road at this point, trying to demonstrate the truth of an assertion that "the longest way around is the shortest way home." So the residence of Mr. Tagg was approached and left far in the rear all in the space of a minute or two, and in but a little longer lapse of time the Thirty skidded gently around the sharp curve into the drive of the Beaman place.

"Who wants to go to Fifer's for fresh milk for supper?" asked Phil Way, as the car stopped

before the old woodshed. Of course no one spoke but this was quite as Phil expected and also quite what he desired. "How'd you like to put the car in, Dave, and Bill and I will go?" he added as if the thought had but that moment occurred to him.

"Sure! Go on. Where's Paul and the Boy, I wonder, though!" Dave answered promptly, not quite relishing the prospect of being left alone, after all.

"Round somewhere. Better call 'em," suggested Phil, but without more ado he brought the largest bucket the camp outfit afforded and with a significant nod to Billy, started slowly out to the road. The latter followed, wondering what in the world his companion had meant by that quick, mysterious look.

"Say, Billy," Way began, thinking to approach his subject gradually; but when he had said this much he paused.

Mr. William Worth answered: "You say, will be more like it."

"Oh, 't isn't anything much," Phil answered,

at a loss for a way to impart Jonas Tagg's whispered intelligence in a gradual, easy manner. "The fact is that we've joked a good bit about weird noises and scarey things of all sorts that we'd hear around the old house at night. I wouldn't be afraid, though, if we really did hear something, would you?"

"Huh?" Billy put as much emphasis and expression into this utterance as if he had said "What's that you say?" a dozen times at once.

"Gee whizz! what's the matter with you? I only said I wouldn't be afraid if we did hear some queer noises tonight, or any night; would you?" Phil half growled, half laughed.

"Sam Hill, Phil, if you've got some notion there *are* ghosts there, for pity sake don't scare a man to death by hinting at it, but talk right out. I know you've got *something* on your mind!" And, having delivered this conviction, Worth stopped in the middle of the road as if he'd not budge an inch till he obtained satisfaction.

"Now, look here, Billy," said Way conciliat-

ingly, "I know that you are sensible about such foolish things as spooks and all that, but Dave isn't, and I'm afraid Paul would be pretty nervous, as well, to say nothing of the Little Chap. So that's why I asked you to come along down to Fifer's with me that I might tell you what that old fellow Tagg told me this morning."

"Great ginger! He said the house was haunted!" was Billy's forceful and sudden exclamation. "Say, *did* he say that? Did he, for a *fact*?"

"Now you keep your shirt on, Billy Worth," was the answer in a tone of reassurance. "No need to get excited and, above all, don't tell the other fellows, at least not yet; but that's the size of the situation. He whispered it to me just as he was going away. He didn't let the Boy hear it, but he whispered to me, Tagg did, 'Ye hadn't ought ter stay here another night. The house is haunted, sure!' Well, sir, I thought mighty little of it at first, and I just said to myself, 'Is that so?' and 'It's a funny *thing*!' But afterward I was some worried by it."

"Why, there's no such thing as ghosts," asserted Billy Worth, shortly, but yet with a note of apprehension in his voice.

"No, 't isn't that. I'm no more afraid of there being real ghosts than you are. Just as you say, there is no such thing; but why does this Jonas Tagg want us to be scared away? And if he has told us there *are* ghosts, and we don't take his word for it and vamoose, isn't he likely to try to produce a spook or two for our special benefit? That's what *I* don't like."

"Humph! Like as not the old chap actually thinks the house *is* haunted. Plenty of people get such notions into their heads whenever an old, old house stands empty a good while and the weeds and brush grow up around it. What purpose could he have in trying to scare *us*?"

This line of reasoning was logical enough but it did not satisfy Phil. He felt that some motive other than kindly friendliness had prompted the visit of Jonas Tagg and his evident desire to coax or frighten his new neighbors away from the Beaman place. What this motive might be,

he could not guess. Perhaps the old fellow was afraid the boys would be destructive and he wished to preserve the property, practically abandoned though it was. Still this was a very doubtful supposition, too.

“We'll just keep our eyes open, that's all,” declared Billy with courage.

“And say nothing to the other fellows?” asked Phil, after some further discussion.

But as to this no decision was reached. The subject was dropped when, with six quarts of fresh, rich milk carried between them by a stick put under the handle of the bucket, the two boys turned in at the rickety little gate. Slowly they walked up the old, old path now bordered by the rank growth of weeds and grass, and so through the big yard to the little portico and the front door.

At the step the boys paused to leave the stick by which they had carried the bucket. It fell with a quiet thud upon the grass-grown gravel when Billy threw it down. Following quickly,

like some strong echo, came a heavier, deeper thud-like sound through the half-open door.

“Hark!”

Again came the noise as before, like some piece of wood striking upon the bare floor far in the depths of the old house.

“Hark!” said Billy Worth again, his hand raised, while he bent lower, listening.

Again and again, at steady intervals, came the deep thud through the doorway.

“Why, it sounds for all the world like somebody stumping around on a wooden leg,” muttered Phil Way, half in earnest, half in jest. His eyes twinkled but his face showed that his thoughts weren’t wholly comfortable.

“That’ll *do* you! This ain’t no time for fooling,” Billy whispered seriously. “What in all-get-out is it, Phil?”

“S’pose we go in—and find out,” came the answer. “Will you come?”

Assuring himself carefully that Billy was right at his heels, Phil picked up the pail of

milk, pushed the door wide open and stepped into the long, dim hall.

Again and again the heavy thud sounded upon the boys' ears but the noise seemed to recede as they advanced. Straight on to the old sitting-room, now their general headquarters, the two resolutely went forth.

"It comes from out-doors!" exclaimed Phil, feeling vastly relieved for some reason.

"Great Scott, Dave! What the dickens you doing?" demanded Billy pretty forcefully, the next moment. For, stepping quickly to the door opening upon the back porch, he found Mr. David MacLester vigorously assaulting a rear tire with a small iron lever. With a heavy thudding sound his measured blows fell upon the rubber.

"What you pounding away that fashion for without telling anybody?" Worth demanded again, a pronounced note of objection to any such high-handed proceeding in his voice.

"Sh-h! Don't tell *him* about it," whispered Phil quickly, and Billy, seeing at once that his

manner might make an unpleasant confession of his very recent fright necessary, changed his tone instantly. It was quite different when he said:

“What’s the row; I mean, what’s happened to the tire, Mac?”

“Nail!” growled David, still whacking away.

The one word told the story. Running through the chickweed and plantain that covered the ground about the woodshed the left rear had struck the unfriendly nail projecting from a bit of board. In trying to remove the damaged tire Dave found it rusted fast in the clinch of the wheel rim. His blows were intended to loosen it.

“Knew there were a million punctures lying loose around here—more or less,” MacLester growled again. “Bet you fellows saw that tire go flat and that’s why you hustled off so.”

“Nothing to that, Davie!” said Phil good-naturedly and, taking the lever from him, soon had the tire off the rim.

“Where’s Paul and the kiddo?” asked Billy.

"Oh, say! don't use that word, Billy! Now don't!" Way protested. "I can stand most anything but that and I've told you plenty of times before."

"Excuse me, teacher," was the answer with a great show of pretended deference. "May I venture, then, to inquire where Mr. Jones and our diminutive juvenile friend may in all probability be at the present moment?"

Phil still looked sober and displeased, so, knowing very well that there were a good many slang words to which Worth did seriously object, and that slang wasn't particularly indicative of intellect, anyway, Billy carried his joke no further.

"Reckon somebody'll have to hunt 'em up. I've looked all over the place," said Dave, referring, of course, to the absent ones. There was still something of a growl in his voice. Punctures and all such annoyances always disturbed MacLester very much more than any of his companions. Somehow he had never fully

learned how much easier it is to see the brighter side once one makes a practice of it.

However, there was no occasion to go in search of Paul Jones and the Boy. Even before the puncture had been located in the inner tube of the tire there came a shrill, sweet voice calling from the orchard:

“How'll about leven fit do for tupper?”

Bright Eyes and Paul were hurrying homeward fairly well rewarded for their expedition to the river.

“'Leven fish—that's two apiece and one over!” shouted Billy with a laugh.

“No-o-o! I didn't lay *leven*; I laid LEVEN,” was the answer.

And seven there were—seven small rock bass.

CHAPTER XII

THE INTERESTING DEVELOPMENTS OF A RAINY DAY

The unexpected addition of fresh, fried fish to the supper of plain bread and milk, and plenty of it, as originally planned, made, it must be admitted, an unusual combination; but keen appetites ask few questions. True, the always thoughtful Philip Way did feebly suggest that the fish might be dressed and kept in cold water to be cooked for breakfast. The proposition met with small favor.

There would be plenty of eggs and plenty of bacon, said Billy Worth, and he added: "Never put off till tomorrow that which you can do to-day;" the logic of which quotation seemed, in this instance, unusually sound and convincing to all concerned.

After supper the boys again sat on the front door step in the pleasant twilight. A light wind

had risen and its murmuring among the branches of the old evergreens and maples, and in the lilac bushes and the tall grass, was inexpressibly sweet and soothing. The clouds were raising in the south and west and in the very atmosphere, so soft and pleasing, the lads felt, as one may often do in the summer, the coming of the rain.

But, though the gentle breeze and its whisperings were sweet and restful, they gave rise to something of a not unpleasant sort of melancholy. The chums talked a great deal about home and of friends in Lannington, and every word was spoken in low and kindly tones. The whole influence of their surroundings and their conversation was to make each and every one feel his friendship and regard for all the others to be very dear and strong indeed.

Even little Bright Eyes escaped all teasing and, though he participated very little in the talk, from his place on the lowest step he would rest his head in the hollow of his arm, thrown over Phil's knee, and so seemed entirely com-

fortable and happy. If, in the darkness, his eyes were wet while all but him were speaking of their homes and those who were thinking of them there, the older boys never knew it; nor could they have guessed in a long, long time the thoughts that largely occupied him. He was such a quietly cheerful, unselfish little chap, he was often in danger of being overlooked entirely.

Maybe it was the very warmth of the friendship among themselves, coming strongly to the surface under the circumstances described, that caused Phil Way to think he and Billy would do wrong to have any secret the others did not share. Going to the living-room for a drink of water, he signaled Worth to join him and, alone together, they at once agreed that all should hear of the information Jonas Tagg had given. The news was told the others then, at once.

Quite contrary to expectations, Dave MacLester was not greatly disturbed by the report that ghosts and goblins frequented the old house.

"Who's seen 'em?" he asked in his practical way.

"Oh! that man Tagg's a fine old fellow to be telling that kind of stuff!" muttered Paul Jones. "I'd—why, I'd just as soon go right up to the kitchen attic at midnight, or any time—right now—if—if it wasn't for those loose boards!"

This produced some laughter and some teasing of Paul, of course, and for a little time no one noticed that Bright Eyes had quietly slipped away. In a couple of minutes he returned.

"Lere aren't anyling up lere; notling at all in le attic, and I went clear back to le window," he announced calmly.

As may well be imagined, his words caused quite a sensation. "Well, I wanted to tee if lere wat anyling up lere," he protested in the midst of the boys' exclamations. "Now I won't be afraid if I wake up in le night, becaut I know lere aren't not'in." The youngster's satisfaction over the result of his investigation was really charming. But his own confidence and

his courage, too, were also a good example to his friends.

All these things led Billy and Phil to tell of the little fright they had had at the front door, upon coming home with the milk, and so the evening was whiled away. The general discussion of the absurdity of Jonas Tagg's ghost talk in every way made light of all such nonsense and it was not without a beneficial result.

The rain came on. The wind blew hard and harder. Thunder and lightning contributed also to the storm. Quickly the boys were driven from the little portico and they went to bed while the old house fairly shook in the gale.

But, pulling the light covers snugly over themselves, and listening to the pelting of the rain drops upon the roof and the bare, uncurtained windows, while the swish and swaying of the trees out there in the storm and darkness added to make their shelter and security seem delightfully comfortable and sweet, one by one the five called "good-night."

Paul's voice was the last. He had said "good-

night" twice, but later he thought of one thing more. Sleepily he murmured, "If that big bass I saw had just had a grain o' sense, I'd 'a got him, blame him!"

Regardless of Mr. Jonas Tagg's whispered communication to Captain Phil, one certain fact is that the Auto Boys' second night in the old house was as uneventful as the first. The sudden and terrific slamming of a door somewhere upstairs, blown shut by the wind, may have caused a bit of nervousness for a minute or two; but Billy guessing, and at once announcing, the cause of the racket, all fell asleep again in just a little longer time than required for the three traditional shakes of a lamb's tail.

Settling down to a steady drizzle, the rain was still falling when another day came. Paul looked out from his hammock some time after dawn, remembering that he had promised himself revenge for the disturbance Billy created the morning before.

His plan was quietly to rig up a dummy figure in his own bed, then slip out to the woodshed

and toot the Thirty's horn—toot it as if there was a moving van ahead. That his friends would suppose meddlers were about and rush out pell-mell to see, he had no doubt.

Yet, somehow, the idea didn't strike him quite so favorably now. He felt pretty snug and warm in his blanket. It looked pretty damp and raw out of doors. Oh, well, what did he care, anyway? He could even up the score a plenty later on. So he cuddled down in the hammock again, shut his eyes and forgot to open them. Nor did he stir further until Dave unceremoniously dumped him out upon the floor after thrice shouting his name without obtaining the slightest response.

As it was, Paul gathered himself up just in time to bring up the rear in a race to the river. A brief plunge, then came a merry chase through the rain back to the house and a brisk rubbing down. This was this morning's program, and in precisely eleven minutes from the moment he was fully dressed as timed by Bright Eyes and the Auto clock (which "Duck" Neely

himself had given the lads) Billy Worth announced breakfast.

True, he had assistance, and, true, bacon and eggs are quickly fried. True, also, it takes rather more than six or seven minutes to fry a big skillet full of potatoes thoroughly; but still, they were all *warmed through*. As for anything more—"Oh, well, what's the odds?" as Paul said.

After breakfast there came a general straightening up of the old sitting-room, and the washing of dishes. The latter task fell to Paul and Dave until the latter, who was drying them, chanced to say: "Goodness! but this wiping dishes is a *greasy* job!"

Billy overheard. In a moment he took in the situation.

"Give me that dish rag!" he demanded.

Paul yielded it with a grin. "Now," said Billy, "you bring in a big bunch of wood for the fireplace and Mac and I will finish this job up without you. Maybe he won't find wiping 'em so greasy, after all."

“Honest, Bill, you’re getting as particular as a woman,” declared Jones vehemently. “Wonder you can think of my going out in all this wet without my rubbers!”

With the morning’s work finished, Phil Way set about writing a letter home. Others followed his example, finding facilities as best they could. Phil and Billy quite monopolized the little table. Dave wrote on an upturned box while Paul sprawled on his stomach at full length on the floor, fairly burying his nose in his paper.

Bright Eyes alone was left unoccupied. For a few minutes he stood in the door-way gazing pensively out at the rain and over the misty valley. Then he drew a camp stool to the hearth and, resting his chin upon one hand, his elbow on his knee, looked long and thoughtfully into the old fireplace and glowing bed of coals.

“Come, come, Jack! Rouse up here!” exclaimed Phil cheerily, his letter finished. “Won’t be any Santa Claus coming down *that* chimney for a while, *will* there?” he laughed.

A wistful,—almost pitiful—little smile was the only answer. Could it be that somebody was homesick, or was he just being quiet that he might not disturb those who were busily writing?

Phil would have given something to know. However, he asked no questions but, better yet, brightened the younger lad up at once by saying that he must go along in the auto to Middle Run. "We'll post our letters, get any mail there may be for us, and a paper, then come home for some fun around the house till it stops raining," was his proposal.

"Tell ye, Phil, we'd better give the car a good cleaning when we get back," chimed in Billy Worth. "She needs it and will need it worse after a run in the mud."

"Just as soon bet that we'll skid over some bank or something," declared Dave, never failing to advance some sort of dire prediction.

"That's right, Mac! That's right! And I'd like to bet," fairly exploded Billy Worth, "I'd just *like* to bet that you can holler calamity in

the most different ways ever introduced. I would, for a fact!"

"No takers," chirped Paul, with his broad grin; but by this time Phil had slipped Bright Eyes into a raincoat, and was putting himself into another. "All aboard, you fellows," said he.

In another three minutes the Thirty was backing out of the woodshed and soon turning out of the drive onto the road with a wide side slip that made everybody but the driver gasp.

The latter was Phil Way himself. Yet it was not because of any particular self-possession he had that the terrific slide of the car did not startle him. The fact was due entirely to the circumstance that he was driving. And you'll find it generally true, the man at the wheel will be perfectly calm though his passengers hold their breaths.

The wet road, in this clayey country, was slippery in the extreme. The Auto Boys soon found slow and careful driving imperative. On the heavy up-grades, too, the rear wheels would

spin and spin, and refuse for seconds together to take hold and push the load forward. All in all, it was the most trying trip the lads had ever made with their car. Once, when their engine was stalled, where a lot of fresh earth had been heaped up in the old-fashioned style of road-making, all but the driver were obliged to clamber out and walk.

After only a short stay in the village, the trip homeward was made by the longer route which came around past the Tagg farm, as has been described. This being a more level road, the Beaman place was reached without further difficulty. Then, the necessity, as well as the desirability, of putting the car in good order, in addition to the general washing up it now sadly needed, having become very apparent, no time was lost in setting about the task.

All the boys, Phil and Billy in particular, had become intimately familiar with the working of the engine. These two occupied themselves with the machinery, therefore, while with rags and water, the latter carried from the old cistern,

Dave and Paul laboriously washed wheels, body and so on.

Bright Eyes was permitted to remove both the oil and the gas lamps to be brightly polished later. He winced perceptibly when Paul remarked with sarcasm that he needn't mind taking off the license tag this time, but except in this one instance he was gay as could be. If his spirits had drooped the night before or at any time, no one would have guessed it now. Nor would, or could, any of his boy friends have guessed at this time that soon, so very soon, his bright, attractive face and cheerful ways would be gone from among them.

When noon came the Thirty was in prime order from crank handle to rear axle, inclusive. Only the brass work remained to be polished and immediately after a hearty lunch of chipped beef, bread and butter, crackers, cheese, cookies (good ones, from home) and coffee, the shining up process was begun. The drizzling rain had not abated and all work on removable parts, such as the lamps, previously carried in by the

Boy, was done beside the cheerful blaze of the fireplace.

Brightly the flames shot up from the old hearth. Right comfortably on this cool, wet day the dry boards, bits of rails and other non-descript firewood crackled and blazed. It was not a large fire,—just enough to give moderate warmth and unlimited cheer, but it dispelled the gloom and cast a bright glow all about the old sitting-room.

Presently, when his own work was done, Billy reached into the corner and drew the wooden leg of the departed one-time soldier to him. Minutely he inspected again the queer characters inscribed upon it; but he shook his head and let the artificial limb fall from his hands directly in front of the fireplace and quite near one of the brightly polished lamps Phil had just set down.

Paul sat on a low box, at one side, rubbing away upon the tail lamp. He had been observing Billy's study of Grandfather Beaman's strange inscription, and as the wooden leg fell

to the floor his eyes followed and rested where it lay.

Gazing earnestly, he became aware in time that the characters burned upon the wood were reflected in the shining brass near it. By degrees he realized that they assumed familiar forms.

Suddenly he bent close to the reflected figures. His expression was deeply studious. He saw how, when mirrored thus, the characters became not figures at all, but letters. His eyes opened wide and wider. His mouth stood agape.

"Gee whillikins, fellows!" he exclaimed, in a low, hoarse tone. "I've found out what them figures say on Grandfather Beaman's wooden leg!"

It has no doubt been observed that in moments of sudden excitement young Mr. Jones was apt to use language not strictly grammatical.

CHAPTER XIII

GRANDFATHER BEAMAN'S PAPERS

Paul Jones' words, coupled with his tone of excitement, precipitated an instant scramble. In the sudden confusion and his own haste, Billy tripped and fell upon Paul. The latter's box was upset and both box and boys tumbled in a heap.

The artificial limb and the polished brass in which the inscription was reflected were under them. Bright Eyes, trying in vain to rescue the lamp, succeeded only in adding himself to the undignified mass of arms and legs squirming and wriggling before the old hearth.

Phil and Dave laughed immoderately—"like a lot of Indians"—Paul said afterward (his similes were often more remarkable for a rough sort of euphony than particular fitness). But Way quickly extricated the Boy, and Jones and Worth untangled themselves as best they could.

"It's all spoiled now, but wait! Just look here!" cried Paul, breathlessly, and he rapidly restored the lamp and the crudely carved wood to their former positions. "Now, see!" he almost shouted, pointing with a wild gesture to the reflection; and the others, huddling close, saw and read the rough, irregular characters the shining brass interpreted.

The inscription in appearance was substantially as follows:

PAPER & IN STONE POST

"Well, I declare," said Phil Way, with suppressed excitement, "that may be pretty important, Paul!"

"Sure!" cried Jones with emphatic confidence.

Was he right or wrong? Just what he believed might come of this knowledge so unexpectedly gained he certainly could not have told, just then, at least. Perhaps Dave Mac-

Lester's own peculiar manner of dashing cold water was a blessing in disguise this time, for it brought the others out of a trance of bewildering thoughts and set their minds to working soberly.

"*What papers? What stone post?*" were David's questions. "Maybe the marks don't mean anything much now they *are* deciphered."

"You leave that to *me*," chirped Paul with an air of proprietorship. "Everybody's heard of things worth stacks of money being turned up in just this way. *You know that*, don't you?"

There was a touch of resentment in Jones' manner, and now Billy sided with him by saying: "Reckon your grandfather wouldn't have bothered to hide 'em if the papers *weren't* worth anything. That's likely, Paul; but how in the world are we going to find 'em?"

"*That's* the point," said MacLester, sorry for once to have caused Jones any irritation. "That's where the trouble's going to be."

"Be quiet, you fellows, and let's go about the whole matter in a sensible way," remonstrated

Captain Phil. Already he was thinking busily and seriously. "Sit down, Bill, and you, too, Dave. We'll bring something out of this yet. Paul, you ought to have some idea as to what stone post your grandfather may have meant."

"Why, one of those he built out of that cement stuff he made," was the answer readily given.

"He made a good many of them, though!" put in Billy, shaking his head.

"Well then, the thing to do is look around," declared Jones, not quite so confidently. And, as all realized that Paul was the one most directly interested, his suggestion was immediately adopted.

However hopeless the prospect may appear to the reader, and however hopeless the prospect was, in fact, it may be truthfully stated that not one of the boys, with the possible exception of MacLester, entertained any such view of the situation. Youth and hope are practically inseparable. It is the combination which does all but perform miracles. Who ever accomplished

anything if he started out with any thought but to succeed?

“Now think just how the words read,” said Phil, reflectively. “‘Papers in stone post.’ It means some one, particular post that, for some reason, was known as *the* ‘stone post’ or a ‘stone post,’ as if it were quite by itself; or, maybe, the only one of the kind there was. Your sister might know about it, Paul. Anyhow, I don’t see what there is for us to do but examine everything about the place that bears any resemblance to what we want.”

“Blest if I see any stone posts to examine,” declared Billy, somewhat later, after a general survey of the premises. “S’pose it might mean the posts the cows were tied to in the barn?”

To a large extent Worth’s expression covered the case. There were steps of cement,—or stone, as Grandfather Beaman called it—also stone or cement watering troughs, feed-boxes and also the big grain bin. There were stone blocks—round, oblong, cubes and pyramids.

There were, however, no stone posts in sight save those in the cow stable. These were inspected, but passed by after the upper half had been broken off one of them by a strong blow with an old pick, and nothing discovered.

All about the farmyard, in the forsaken, weed-grown garden, through the orchard and back again, and in every corner of the front doorway the boys pursued the search.

“Papers in stone post,” they repeated to one another scores of times; but the deep, wet grass was trampled down in vain. The blackbirds, chattering noisily from the low marshes toward the river bridge, might just as well have said, “Papers in stone post,” for all the constant repetition of the words, or even the hunt, accomplished.

“Tell you what, Paul,” said Phil Way, at last, “I believe Mr. Fifer might know something about that post, especially if there was anything out of the ordinary about it. The Fifers have always lived about here, haven’t they?”

Jones thought the Fifers had lived in their

present habitation "since about the year one;" at least that's what he said; but he was also of the opinion that it would not be best to let them know the secret that had been discovered.

"Don't need to," put in Billy Worth, promptly. "Who would ever think it strange if we asked questions about this old place? I just think we *could* find out something from the Fifers."

Thus began with the Auto Boys a series of incidents which added to their outing more spice of excitement and more of adventure than often falls to any one group of youths in a whole year through.

Tramping up and down, up and down, over nearly every foot of the two or three-acre strip of ground between the highway and the river, which comprised all that now remained of the old Beaman farm, the boys had consumed most of the afternoon. Tired, wet and disappointed, yet exulting still in the discovery of that strange inscription's meaning, they gathered once more about the big fireplace. Here they discussed at

length the suggestion that the Fifer family might be able to throw some light on the situation.

To an almost absurd extent were all the lads impressed by what seemed, to them, the extreme desirability of keeping secret the discovery chance had brought them. Perhaps, too, they feared the ridicule to follow if it developed that the characters on the wooden leg had no particular significance, after all. At any rate they pledged each other to the strictest secrecy as they discussed means of pushing their investigations further.

"I'll just try the Fifers. No harm in asking a few questions, anyhow," announced Paul Jones, at last. "You come with me, Phil. It's time to go for milk and some good, fresh drinking water, anyway. We'll do the two errands at one time."

Any plan that would change their fruitless talk into activity of some kind was just what all the boys wanted and needed, if they had but reasoned that far. And now Bright Eyes

brought the tin pails for milk and for water. Phil and Paul set out at once.

In their absence Billy sent Dave and the Boy to hunt up and carry in a fresh supply of fuel while he, the acknowledged chief of the culinary department,—and he glorified in his ability—set about to utilize some milk that had soured in the making of a fine large johnny-cake to be served hot for supper.

Right deftly he handled cups, spoons and pans and all that he needed in his self-allotted task. Soda, salt, cornmeal with a little flour added,—everything necessary was at hand and, by the time Phil and Paul came in, there were baking close before the bed of red hot coals two large cakes as fine as ever made from corn.

It was no mean accomplishment. Many a time had Billy put his knowledge of cookery to good use. It had been easily acquired. He gathered it all at home. He could dress and roast either chicken or wild fowl or fry a rabbit. He could prepare all the more simple dishes an ordinary camp would require.

Originally he had learned a little just for fun, but life at the "Retreat" in Gleason's ravine, which readers of "The Auto Boys" will readily recall, had added to his experience and his desire to know more.

There was something fascinating to him in the art of changing raw food products into delicious, appetizing dishes ready for the table. He only hoped the day might come, when, on some distant hunting expedition, he would broil juicy venison steaks, and in other ways have every opportunity to put his knowledge to the test and give his own appetite free rein, before some bright campfire far in the depths of the forest.

"My! They do smell good, Billy!" said Phil, leaning over to inspect the two johnny-cakes tilted up in their pans, quite inside the fireplace.

"What else you got, Bill? I'm hungry as a tramp, and we've something to tell you too. We'll tell it at supper; that's what Phil and I have agreed."

This, from Paul Jones, elicited the information that hot johnny-cake and molasses, boiled

eggs, green corn, toast and coffee would all be ready soon.

The corn was a surprise which pleased all five boys greatly. A Mrs. Alban, who lived beyond the bridge, had sent it over during the afternoon. Billy received the neighborly offering while the others were hunting for the mysterious stone post at the far side of the little orchard. Like all good cooks, he kept the dozen well-filled ears out of sight. Thus did he cause their appearance, quite unexpectedly and at a time when appetites were keen, to be all the more enjoyable.

“Ready soon,” might mean five or fifteen minutes, or even more, when used by Chef Worth concerning the progress of a meal. It is a prerogative handed down in the culinary profession from very ancient times, undoubtedly,—this right of chefs, to make such positive, yet most indefinite statements. Billy being no exception, and, having set out to have an especially bountiful supper (inspired in part, by the mag-

nitude of his own appetite) he was not to be hurried in the least.

Yet "ready soon" did become "all ready now" in due course and the friends were scarcely seated at table when Paul began.

"Mr. Fifer told us all about a big stone post Grandfather Beaman made," said he, with lively enthusiasm. "He's sure its 'round here because he recollects having seen it not such an awful while ago, he says."

"Just as if we hadn't been all over the place with a fine-tooth comb!" ejaculated Dave. "Mercy! This butter's seen better days," he added a moment later, his mouth full of corn.

"Humph! Let me see," said Billy, doubtfully. "Maybe it is turning the least little bit," he acknowledged, after a critical test. "We ought to have ice."

"There's fresher butter, isn't there, Billy?" inquired Phil, who knew the young chef's weakness pretty well.

"Why to be sure! You may have it if you



“We’ve got him! Let’s take the ladder down!”

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say so, but we'll never get this that we brought from home used up, at that rate."

"Now ain't he getting to be a regular woman, though?" cried Paul, "Why, say!" he went on, vociferously, after a good deal of smacking and tasting, "You can almost tell by the *taste* that this isn't the fresh creamery we got today."

"Just what I thought!" Worth answered, grinning. "You can hardly notice it. If I'd told you it *was* the new butter, you'd have been perfectly satisfied. I don't care, though. You get the new butter on that box in the kitchen, will you, Jack?" he concluded, pleasantly.

Bright Eyes hastened away. "Don't you fellows know that we've got an extra boarder with us?" demanded Billy, in his absence. "We never calculated on feeding more than ourselves. I think we ought to economize a little, that's what I do."

The words were not intended for the Boy's ears at all. Unfortunately he could not help overhearing them. He went on to the kitchen but waited there a minute or two till his eyes

were quite dry again and he could smile as blithely as usual, before returning with the package of newer butter.

"I don't link it very bad at all. I'll eat le old butter, Billy," said he cheerily, seating himself again.

And the pity of it was that not one of the boys guessed that the words Worth had spoken had reached his ears. They would have been sorry had they known. They would be sorry indeed to lose their new friend now, too. They did hope to find whence he came.

Paul had been told of the letter sent to Washington, with this purpose in view, the day he and Bright Eyes were fishing. And he, as well as Phil, Billy and Dave was eager to take the little stranger home to Lannington. They would do it if they could but find there was no reason why they should not, or might not. That they were in any immediate danger of being suddenly separated from him, however, never entered their heads.

The little incident at supper has been related

just as an illustration of a number of the kind. The Auto Boys meant to be generous and kind to the youngster who, for reasons unknown, had almost forced himself into their charge, but time and again words were let slip or some quick glance exchanged which hurt the young stranger—hurt a great deal more now than the same things would have done at first, before he had been taken in as a member of the party.

“No, sir, Jack! You shall not eat butter that Dave or anybody condemns,” said Phil Way, stoutly. But although the lad nodded acquiescence, he quietly adhered to his own original declaration, and in the lively discussion which soon ensued, no one noticed it.

“Looks a whole lot to me as if somebody had found that stone post and what was in it,” said Billy, returning to the former subject. “Why, it’s all of twelve years since your grandfather died, Paul!”

Jones had to acknowledge that such a length of time had elapsed. But he was still of the opinion that Mr. Fifer would be able to give

more information of value if he could but recall where he had lately seen the post he remembered Mr. Beaman to have made.

"The chances are," said Phil, "that the inside of the post was hollow, with an opening in that end which set in the ground. The papers, or whatever other things were to be hidden, were put into the hollow. Then, when the post was set up, they were concealed, as much as they ever could be. Nobody would ever think of looking for anything inside, unless he knew it was there, of course."

"Why, sure! No more than a rabbit," said Paul, very seriously.

"Humph! Not half so much, I reckon," laughed Dave. "A rabbit would be sure to be looking for a post with a hole in it."

"We'll have the satisfaction of knowing what the thing we're hunting for looks like, when we nose around tomorrow, anyway," put in Phil.

"Did Mr. Fifer tell you?" asked Billy.

"That's so, we didn't tell that!" exclaimed Paul, full of confidence again. "It all comes

of Dave making a fuss over the butter, just when we got started. I should say Mr. Fifer *did* tell us a few things. He said Grandfather Beaman made out of his cement mixture, or whatever the stuff was, a big, heavy post that looked like a cannon lifted off its wheels, and—”

“They don’t call ’em *wheels*! They call the whole thing a carriage—a gun carriage, Ignoramus!” corrected Dave, witheringly.

“Don’t interrupt, my little man, and after while, when we have time, we’ll talk about something you know something about,” was Paul’s answer, with very extreme condescension.

This exchange produced a smile or two from the others and a delightfully hearty laugh from Bright Eyes; but before Dave could reply, Paul continued:

“This post looked just like a cannon lifted off of its *wheels* as I said before. Looked like the gun, and *not* the carriage, you see; which thing it was just on my tongue to say when somebody—or nobody (this with a very self-satisfied grin) interrupted. It was a big, heavy thing,

large at one end, and small at the other and finished off in every way just like a cannon."

"Plain as dirt!" cried Billy Worth, enthusiastically. "There was the hole in one end of it, of course! Now we're beginning to arrive somewhere!"

"We've got to guess about the hole in the post," said Phil quietly. "Mr. Fifer didn't know whether there was one or not. He doesn't even remember whether the post was ever set up or not. He said Mr. Beaman showed it to him in the woodshed, long ago, soon after he finished making it, and told him it was *very valuable*."

CHAPTER XIV

FOOTSTEPS

The prolonged discussion of the day's developments kept the boys about the supper table so long that, springing up at last, Billy said "somebody" would never get the dishes washed before dark if "somebody" didn't step lively. Bright Eyes at once volunteered to help, and began clearing the table.

"It's you and me for it, I s'pose, Young Mystery," said Dave, good-naturedly; for lazy or unwilling to do his share were two things that MacLester never was. So he turned to the work immediately. With the sweet consciousness that he had done *his* share before supper, Billy sauntered onto the old back porch.

The clouds that, during much of the day, had been pouring out their contents, and even after the rain ceased continued heavy and unbroken were now giving way. In great billows they

still obscured the sky, save for patches of blue here and there, but the sun was going down bright and clear.

Every prospect gave promise of a fair day to come. A robin chirped musically from one of the large cherry trees by the drive. From the orchard came the shrill trilling of the tree toads. From some distant pasture the lowing of cattle was heard.

As Billy looked away over the thick growth of grass and weeds, still wet and sodden, he saw, through the orchard, the glint of the sun's last rays on the river. Sparkling and bright at first, their light was fast growing dim and he thought he would watch until the last shining line disappeared. Phil came and stood beside him.

"See! Isn't it pretty down there on the water?" he said.

"And peaceful and quiet! I just love the country," replied Way in the gentle manner he always had at such times. "And such air!"

An old white horse hitched to a vehicle that at one time was possibly a phaeton though now it

lacked top, dashboard and practically everything it should have except wheels, and possessed much more of mud than seemed even reasonable under any circumstances, had stopped out on the road at the entrance to the drive. The alighting of the owner was what first attracted the notice of the two boys. Leaving his horse in the middle of the road, he approached the farmhouse.

"It's Tagg!" exclaimed Phil under his breath. "What do you s'pose *he* wants?"

"No good to us, I'll wager," Billy whispered, as both boys turned to answer the old fellow's greeting. It was a decidedly crusty:

"Still here, be ye?"

"Still here, Mr. Tagg," Phil answered cordially.

The caller wore the same dirty boots and faded, ill-kept clothes as at the time of his first visit. His sharp nose and generally unpleasant visage were not, this time, however, softened by any effort he made to be amiable.

"Billy Worth, one of the boys of our party I

mentioned the other morning," said Phil, as Mr. Tagg came close up.

Mr. William Worth acknowledged the introduction after the usual form of saying he was glad to make the acquaintance, or something to the same effect; but he added in his own thoughts, an emphatic "not." Very likely the visitor said the same, in his own mind, too, for he certainly appeared far from overjoyed.

Aloud he said, "How'dy do, young man?" and repeated the same thing twice, a moment later, when Phil called Dave and Paul, whom he introduced in a manner quite unconventional and friendly.

Paul could not refrain from showing a rather savage expression and, no doubt, the neighborly Mr. Tagg noticed it. His own temper did not improve, apparently, for he was more crusty than before when he said: "Didn't see fit to take me up 'bout goin' to my sugar camp to stay. Now, I told you once this here house wasn't safe, an' I've come tonight to tell ye ag'in."

“We fully meant to go down in your woods and see how we’d be suited there,” said Phil, with plenty of respect but also ample dignity, “but we’ve been pretty busy, and the—”

“Yaas, busy turnin’ things upside down, I’ll warrant,” interjected Tagg with a feeble attempt at a smile that wouldn’t come. The old fellow and smiles were not on terms of great intimacy anyway, as may be imagined.

“Found plenty of old traps an’ rubbish an’ that’s ’bout all—’bout all ol’ man Beaman had, anyhow, I reckon,” the visitor went on, then paused as if for an answer.

Paul Jones shot a quick, meaning glance at Phil, but if he feared for a moment that the latter did not see the real drift of Mr. Tagg’s inquiry, he was greatly mistaken. It would take more cleverness than this old gentleman had shown yet, at least, to pull the wool over Way’s eyes.

“Found some tip-top apples in the orchard, good place to swim, and a rusty nail that one

of our tires picked up," was the response Phil made.

"Also some good neighbors who sent us over some dandy roasting ears," put in Billy, just for spite, it is really to be feared.

Mr. Tagg scrutinized the faces of all the boys sharply. Perhaps he was not satisfied with the general conclusion he seemed to reach, for he said again, curtly:

"Old man Beaman never could get ahead, somehow, an' he died poor as poverty itself. But it don't matter, anyhow. He's gone, an' I'm here, an' you boys ain't no business stayin' 'round this house. Likely ye ain't seen nothin' yet to make ye say 'yes,' to that, but ye will,—*ye will* an' I'm just doin' my duty by ye to stop goin' home from the Run to tell ye. No tellin', nuther, what all kind o' sickness ye'll git, pokin' into sullen an' garret, I'll warrant."

"What might there be worth looking for? It would be good fun to hunt for hidden treasure or anything like that, if there was anything to

be found. Do you suppose there *might* be, Mr. Tagg?"

This question from Dave MacLester puzzled the old gentleman. Very plainly he was at a loss to know whether the speaker was earnest or otherwise. For Mr. Tagg was quick enough of perception in his own way—quick enough, for that matter, that he should have known the boys were not fooled for an instant by his own guarded inquiries. If they had had the least doubt heretofore that their presence at the old place caused Mr. Tagg considerable anxiety, that doubt was dispelled now.

For a few seconds their visitor eyed Dave keenly but still made no response to the boy's words.

"Ef ye mean that fer a fair question," he retorted rather tartly, at last, "I give ye the fair answer, there's nothin' here, o' course. If ye're jist impudent, es I suspect, why, then, I kin on'y say that ye've be'n meddlin' a'ready with other folks' goods more'n they'd like, dead an' gone though they be."

“No, that’s hardly right, Mr. Tagg,” put in Phil, sorry that Dave’s words had been impertinent. “We haven’t meddled very seriously and we haven’t harmed anything.”

“Ain’t meddled, eh?” snarled the old fellow, decidedly irritated. “Ain’t meddled? What ye doin’ with that wooden leg, ’at I see layin’ in there by the fireplace? Don’t ye call that meddlin’?”

“What harm could there be in our looking at that? Didn’t it belong to my grandfather?” put in Paul quickly. He would have added, “What business of yours is that?” had he said all that he felt; but for once he did restrain his all too-ready tongue.

“No harm but makin’ trouble,” Mr. Tagg answered, a little less harshly than before. “I told ye t’ come down an’ stay in my sugar bush an’ let things be, here! Ye kin mind it er not. I ain’t foolin’, not a mite of it, an’ if ye don’t come now ye can come later, fer I say it ag’in, this ain’t no place fer ye!”

With which remarks, in a manner still threat-

ening and harsh, but yet somewhat coaxing too, the visitor, shaking his head as he went, betook himself to his conveyance still waiting in the road.

His gait was like a succession of stumbles, his body bent far over, his head drawn down to his shoulders. Even in the seat of the one-time phaeton, he leaned over till his chin was almost above the place where the dashboard should have been, and the entire outfit presented a truly sorry spectacle, as he clucked and sputtered, "G'lang now; G'lang now!" to the old white horse.

Bright Eyes looked curiously from one to another of the boys as silently they watched Mr. Tagg's departure. In his own eyes there was an amused twinkle and all unconsciously his clear-cut, intelligent face reflected his own opinion of the visitor's warning. Even his nose was turned just a bit upward in an expression of mild scorn.

"Awful lorry, Mi'ter Tagg, but hone't I'm not 'cared any!" the little chap exclaimed presently,

still eying the others as if to see how they felt about it.

“Nope, we’re not scared so far, Jack,” returned Phil, cheerily, “and we’ve only got to remember not to be scared later on.”

“You mean you think he will try to frighten us away?” asked Billy. “Because that’s just what I was thinking. The only trouble is, how are we going to be ready for him? Nobody wants to sit up all night!”

“Might most as well as to get up in the middle of the night and beat all the tinware full of holes!” put in Dave with sarcasm, referring to Billy’s recent early morning performance.

“Shucks! I just played the reveille for you! That’s the thanks I get for trying to be sociable!” Worth growled, with a pretense of injured feelings.

“We could fix up dummies in our beds, then slip out and sleep in the orchard, so that if anyone did come around making a disturbance, they could make it and go away again,” proposed Jones, with a grin. “Wouldn’t they have a

good time, though! Jimminy! I think that's a pretty clever plan!" he added a moment later, with decided self-satisfaction.

"Good idea, but it would seem to show that we were afraid to stay in the house," Phil reasoned, thoughtfully. "And then what if no one came near? The joke would be on us, sure!"

"Couldn't be sure whether anyone did come or not, if we didn't happen to see them," put in Dave. "I don't think much of that scheme, myself."

"Very well! Very well!" said Jones with a great deal of mock dignity, "let somebody name a better one."

But no one did name a better plan, or offer any new suggestion, for the time. Soon Little Mystery, who had disappeared directly after his own observation that he wasn't frightened, returned announcing that he had finished the dish washing all by himself. The result was no little praise for the Boy and a few sharp thrusts at Dave for having deserted his work. Then came much talk of other things.

“If we just had a way of giving anybody coming to scare us a bigger scare for himself, it would be the very thing,” observed Phil, later on, when the boys had gathered about the hearth of the old fireplace. The evening was just cool enough to make the glowing embers a source of comfort. Way was studying the flickering bits of flame thoughtfully. “The very thing,” he said again.

“Seems a little crazy for us to be concocting such schemes when it’s just guess work, after all, that anybody has any thought of coming near,” remarked Dave, feeling very comfortable in the chimney corner and fearing any suggestion that might force him to leave it.

“That’s all right,” Phil replied, “but the time to lock the barn is before the horse is stolen.”

“Well, you all know that I was the most timid one in the party before we got to this old house,” Dave persisted, “and it stands to reason, after the fun you fellows tried to have with me about it, that if anyone’s going to get scared here, I’m the man. So I’ll make a

motion that we just wait and see what happens."

"Good deal easier than going to work rigging up a trap of some kind for a make-believe ghost that we just half-way imagine may come nosey-ing around, but just as likely may not." This from Billy, who had brought in a large cushion from the automobile and lay curled up on it, like a kitten, before the fire. He, also, it appeared, was quite too comfortable to contemplate anything requiring immediate exertion.

"Well, I said my say a good while ago," reiterated Paul, sleepily, persisting in his own original proposal, but only half-heartedly now. Maybe he, likewise, preferred that there be no occasion for leaving the cozy blanket he had spread down.

"We're all of ut ju't laty,—almo't," was the Little Chap's comment, and he added the saving word, "almost" in such a gentle way that everybody laughed.

Thus the evening passed. Phil half dozed on his seat, a low box, his chin in his hands. Bright

Eyes was on the floor beside him, the box also supporting his elbow, and time flew on till the glow from the fireplace was faint and the large room quite dark.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Footsteps—heavy footsteps somewhere and very near—uncomfortably near.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Again the footsteps. Where were they? All five boys were sitting up, keenly alert and listening.

“S-h-h!” It was Phil’s soft call for quiet, emphasized by his raised hand.

Louder,—much louder than before, sounded the deep thud of feet upon bare boards. There could be no mistaking the source of the sounds now. They came from the cellar stairway. Certainly someone, or something, was climbing heavily up the steps, back of that closed door, which led below.

Thump! Thump! The sound gave every indication of being very, very near to the top of the stairs.

In amazement and doubt, taken by surprise and really much more startled than frightened, the five boys awaited the outcome.

Tap-tap-tap-tap. It was a muffled, rather uncertain rapping on the cellar door itself. But instantly it was answered.

"I get you can come in!" called a soft little voice.

It was Bright Eyes, springing up with a laugh, regardless of the hand Phil still raised for silence. "Come in!" he called again quite loudly. There was no answer.

"Open the door! Open the door, quick!" cried Phil, the next instant, his own courage stimulated by the younger lad's example. Leaping to his feet, he put his order into immediate execution himself.

A space of only a few seconds at most had elapsed. A shuffling noise was heard but it was the only sound and nothing was to be seen, though the cellar door was open wide.

Quickly Phil struck a match, and Billy, close beside him, peering into the darkness below,

lighted another; but a sudden gust of wind from the open cellar windows put both tiny lights out instantly. The darkness seemed intense, the cellar door only a deeper shadow, leading down to pitch blackness.

“Where’s the automobile lamp? Let’s get one of the search lights and the gas tank and hunt the place over!” cried Dave.

Even before he was through speaking Paul was out of the open door, onto the porch and heading for the automobile in the woodshed at a run.

Dave closely followed. They reached the car before they fully realized the difficulty of connecting up the search light with their gas supply in a manner to permit of it being carried. “See what we can do with an oil lamp or the old lantern—anything!” cried Paul, as, fumbling with the connections in the darkness, Dave declared the search light could not be handled. “See! Phil’s got something burning now!” he almost shouted, turning swiftly toward the house again.

At a run MacLester followed Jones, but, trip-

ping or slipping where the plantain grew thick beyond the porch, he fell—fell like a bag of meal, taking the breath quite out of him.

Considerably stunned, Dave lay still. For perhaps a full minute he made no effort to rise. Then, as his scattered senses came slowly back, he saw through a low window a gleam of light and realized that a search of the cellar had begun.

Quickly gathering himself up, he had risen on hands and knees when a swiftly-moving shadow caught his attention. It seemed to dart almost out of the earth, as it emerged from the depths of the outside cellar entrance, and almost instantly disappeared around the corner of the house toward the front dooryard.

Both startled and frightened, Dave managed to scramble to his feet. Frantically he waved his arms, but his voice failed him and his effort to shout died away in a hoarse gasp.

The shadow was gone. It was the figure of a man. Of so much MacLester was certain. But he was equally sure that that man was not Jonas Tagg.

CHAPTER XV

A TOUR OF EXPLORATION

Quite dazed by his fall and the excitement of what he had seen, Dave stumbled giddily forward to the outer cellar steps. Still unable to command his voice properly, he stamped loudly upon the upturned, open door causing no little consternation in the hearts of the four boys below.

Thinking, quite naturally, that these were more sounds from the feet so lately heard upon the stairs, Phil, Billy, Paul and the Boy approached the source of the noise bravely, if not boldly. Phil and Bright Eyes were in the lead, the former carrying an oil auto lamp in one hand, a broken picket, gathered for firewood, in the other. Little Mystery had grabbed up the long-handled frying pan and Paul was armed with a broom.

“What—what—what you doing here?” de-

manded Phil, with what force he could muster, catching sight of a dark figure dimly outlined on the steps above, and he raised his picket threateningly.

This movement in itself, made plainly visible to Dave by the light of the auto lamp, was enough to cause him some alarm. Added to Phil's own harsh tone and the experience he had so lately undergone, it made his voice shaky and uncertain, but the state of his temper quite noticeable, as he managed to gasp: "What—in—thunder do you think I'm doing?"

Vastly relieved as he recognized the voice, Phil laughed in spite of himself, and with this encouragement Bright Eyes also burst into a merry little chuckle that was all his own.

"Why didn't you *say* who it was, then? Pounding away on the door like an Indian!" ejaculated Paul in exasperated tones. And this made Billy laugh and then they all laughed together, the strain and suspense for the moment over.

It was but a few seconds, however, until Dave

was telling what he had seen. As well as he could, he described the shadow which darted forth from the cellarway and announced his conviction that the figure was not that of Mr. Tagg. Who the person might have been he made no attempt to say. He was only sure that the man was younger and vastly more active than their elderly neighbor.

There was no need of searching further, though Paul and Billy, keeping unusually close together, did venture around into the great, dark front yard, where the breeze made mournful music in the trees, and finally all around the house. They found nothing and presently all the boys were again gathered about the old fireplace.

If they heaped on a large quantity of wood and made the blaze mount up strong and bright, which, as a matter of fact they did, perhaps it was because they were quite chilled by their exercise. Perhaps—but the oil lamp from the automobile didn't make a really bright light, anyway; remember that.

What would be the next move in this game of give and take, so unexpectedly put into full activity? That was the question, and thereby hinged several important matters, among them the wisdom or the unwisdom of going to bed.

If talk could have accomplished anything the boys must have achieved much. Unfortunately it did nothing but help to pass the time. Yet it did bring another result, too,—the determination to hold the fort, at all hazards, and to find in the morning and trace, if possible, the footprints of the intruder. They might at least confirm, or disprove, Dave's positive declaration that the pretended ghost was not Mr. Tagg. The old gentleman's footmarks could be found along the muddy road where his phaeton had stood, and if these tallied with those which could probably be discovered elsewhere, as Phil insisted must be the case, the evidence would be convincing.

It was long after midnight before the conversation flagged. Not a disturbing sound had been heard in the whole course of the later eve-

ning, and now a decided drowsiness began to manifest itself among the occupants of the old house. Roosters were already crowing somewhere in the neighborhood. Going to the door, Billy declared he saw the first glimmer of daylight above the eastern hills.

"I get we better go to bed, len, hadn't we?" yawned the Youngster, who for sometime had been about midway between sleeping and waking.

Somebody else said: "Get we had, Pete!" It was Paul, of course, and he made for his hammock as if nothing could disturb him further, even though the house came down.

Immediately, but with rather greater deliberation, the others followed young Mr. Jones' precipitous example. Only Phil, careful and conservative always, remained awake for any length of time; and at last, when the dawn showed plainly through the open door, he also settled himself snugly under the covers and, his hand resting fondly on Bright Eyes' shoulder, gave himself up to sleep.

What with the early morning swim being very late to begin with, then lasting longer than usual, and a search for footprints being made immediately afterward, it was approaching noon before breakfast was served in the old house this morning. It was Saturday. The sun shone pleasantly and the soft, clear air, after the rain and clouds of the day before, seemed doubly exhilarating. Certainly it would have been a time of exquisite happiness for the Auto Boys had they felt entirely care-free.

Unfortunately this could not be. While the adventure of the night did not weigh heavily upon their spirits, nor yet make them in any sense wretched or seriously worried, it did furnish a subject for serious thought and occupation. Then, too, there was the mysterious stone post they so earnestly wished to find to engage their thoughts, to say nothing of the scores of opportunities for fun actually going to waste, simply for want of the time for them—base balls and bats, fishing tackle and who knows what all, not to mention countless ideas and

special plans which the place and occasion constantly suggested. Strange that one should always think of some one thing that he would very much like to do, just when he must be busily engaged with something else!

The search for Mr. Tagg's footprints along the road where his horse had stood was an easy matter. The broad stamp of his ungainly rubber boots in the soft clay was unmistakable. To find similar marks or any imprints whatever in the cellar, on the inside stairs leading up to the sitting-room, or on the steps at the outer entrance, was not so easy. Indeed, the whole search was finally abandoned at these places with no kind of success.

Very likely no shred of information throwing light on the pretended ghost's identity would have been found at any time but for the merest chance which took Bright Eyes to the extreme south side of the large front yard. He was gathering odds and end of rails, bits of board and the like, for evening firewood, when he wandered along the old picket fence. Half

falling down and in some places quite tumbling to decay, it stood and lay between the Beaman grounds and the cornfield on the south. A freshly broken picket caught the lad's eye. He examined more closely and found tracks in the soft earth beside the growing grain. Some one had evidently gone over the old fence in a hurry, as the broken picket testified.

Little Mystery lost no time in calling the older boys and they followed the footprints through a corner of the ploughed field to the sod along the roadside. Here the trail was lost and long searching failed to re-discover it.

There could be no doubt but the imprints were made by the unknown intruder. Moreover, there could be no doubt that they were not made by Jonas Tagg. The pretended ghost had worn shoes, it was plain, and of a size that Mr. Tagg's number elevens would hardly have fitted. The one circumstance which might connect the disagreeable neighbor with the night's disturbance was that the intruder's flight had been in the direction of that old fellow's residence.

All in all, it was a real relief to the boys when they resolved to let their troubles and mysteries rest and take the car out for an afternoon of exploring. Bright and shining from radiator to baggage rack, every bit of brass glistening and the engine working perfectly, the Thirty was surely an object to love and admire as the wheels gently skidded onto the main road. Dave held the wheel and Bright Eyes, at Phil's special request, had the seat beside him. The tonneau accommodated the other three nicely, and when MacLester took them all skimming down the grade and over the river bridge like a short, quick roll of distant thunder, it was fun. Fun! Was there ever anything like it?

Turning to the left at the forks beyond the stream, rather than to the right, which latter road would have taken them directly to Middle Run village, the boys found themselves on a new but fairly good road. Bending in and bending out, it seemed to follow the river for many miles. The blackberry and elder bushes lined the old rail fences. The green of the willows

near the water's edge was delightfully restful and the more so when their overhanging branches, and the boughs of the butternut, hickory and sycamore trees, near the road, cast cool shadows where the Thirty left distance smoothly, silently behind.

"We mustn't go so far but we'll have plenty of time to go home through Middle Run and get our mail," Phil suggested.

"And something to eat for Sunday," put in Paul.

"About time we were hearing from that letter you sent the other day, Phil," said Billy quietly, referring to the inquiry mailed to Washington. He spoke in an ordinary tone, but the Boy caught his words and glanced around with quick, searching eyes.

"No, I don't think so. No matter, anyway," was the answer in a careless tone; and if the little lad still had some notion that this letter, so guardedly mentioned, had reference to himself, he did not show it.

Perhaps in his own thoughts he supposed his

new friends might be making some effort to discover his identity. It would have been hard to say, however, whether he may not have believed them now entirely satisfied to take him as he was, with no knowledge of his past history. Once, in fact, in his own odd way, he said:

“What difference whether I ever knew you, or you ever knew me before? S’pose a dog had followed you along the road and took a liking to you, and maybe you liked him a little bit; you wouldn’t care if he couldn’t tell you where he came from— wouldn’t care anything about that, just so you knew he didn’t *belong* to anybody.”

What a curious mixture of guilelessness and yet, at times, of penetration far beyond his years, this little lad presented! They were probably no more observing than most boys of their age, yet the four chums could not help but be impressed by the peculiar strength of their new friend’s spirit and character. Mild, affectionate, craving gentleness and kindness at most times, he would nevertheless show now

and again a hustling independence and a fiery strength of will that were indomitable.

Of his sturdy manliness and courage there could be no doubt, and if sometimes there was reason for suspecting a certain moisture about his eyes, no one would have thought of calling him "baby" on that account—no, not for one moment. It only meant that somewhere in his heart the secret he would not reveal was causing a twinge he could never wholly suppress.

It was after four o'clock when, by way of Twig's cider mill at Oldgrove, for information as to which a debt of gratitude was due Mr. Spike Marble, the five friends drove into Middle Run. With a bit more of a flourish than was strictly necessary, perhaps, they drew up before the grocery where the tall young gentleman just mentioned gave valuable assistance when not talking base ball.

Spike saw the car instantly. Half of Middle Run saw it, for that matter, and a goodly portion of that half gave the machine and its occupants a larger share of attention than was

strictly compatible with their ordinary duties.

Not so, young Mr. Marble. He finished waiting on the minister's wife with as perfect self-control and polite interest in her purchases as if there had never been an automobile or interesting new friends as its owners within five miles of him. Even when he placed the half-pound of cheese, the last item, in her basket, he no more forgot, "And now what else, please?" than he would have forgotten yesterday's score.

And let it be said just here that Spike Marble had the right idea. If he was selling groceries his whole heart was in that and nothing else. If he was playing base ball he could be counted on for anything from stick work to head work.

As the minister's wife departed, the Auto Boys entered the store. There were no other customers at the moment. The tall young clerk expressed his pleasure upon seeing his friends again as did they upon meeting him. Needless to say, also, inquiry was promptly made regarding the proposed Middle Run-Wilton ball game.

"Just what I wanted to tell you—it's Monday

afternoon, here at our Fairgrounds park," said Spike briskly. "Thought I'd stroll over to your camp and tell you, tomorrow, if you didn't happen in."

"Come on over, anyway," said Phil, cordially, and the others echoed the invitation which was gladly accepted. Then as the talk ran on while Chef Billy ordered fresh eggs, bacon, sardines, boiled ham, and a number of other items, including a fine large watermelon, it was decided that, like civilized young men, the Auto Boys and Bright Eyes with them, of course, should attend church in Middle Run with Marble in the morning, and take him home with them to dinner.

The ball game was discussed, also, and the interesting intelligence elicited that Sam Carew had joined forces with the Wiltonites and would be their principal and, possibly, their only pitcher.

"And that being so, I'd just like to have one of you to draw on for our team," said Spike. "We'll let them play an outsider, and no one can holler if we have one."

This offered an interesting prospect and Phil promised on Dave's behalf that the latter would get his arm into practice a bit that very evening.

It was an odd coincidence that Carew was found at the newsstand in the bookstore a little later, as the Auto Boys went in, and that he walked away without responding to their friendly, "Hello!"

Could it be that he had heard of the probable line-up for Monday's game and wished at once to show a hostile feeling? Or was he still sulking and spiteful over the sad spectacle he made of himself in connection with the downfall of the Star Lake club?

In any event Sam's manner showed plainly that he felt anything but friendly. Phil Way was irritated, yet sorry. He had hoped to let bygones be bygones with Carew and had none but a good feeling toward him.

Paul, on the other hand, expressed himself in no uncertain language, the general tenor thereof being that Sam was "a fine young rabbit," and also a "sorehead, and never was anything but a

little cabbage head, anyway." Billy and Dave expressed themselves as being quite indifferent regarding Mr. Samuel Carew's attitude either one way or another. Yet they did not see why he should act as he did.

"A lot more mail than some folks have hay," declared the amiable young gentleman of whom the boys inquired for their letters at the post-office. He wore a distressingly high collar and a tiny, black bow tie and parted his hair in the middle. Anyone might have supposed, from his little vanities and very sleek appearance, that he was at least the third, or, maybe the first or second assistant postmaster-general; but he had a cordial manner about him, too, that went a good way to atone for possible shortcomings.

How much hay "some folks" would have to have to balance the eight or ten letters and half dozen newspapers and postcards the young gentleman, who might have been the assistant postmaster-general, passed out to the Auto Boys, would involve considerable calculation. So, content to take his word for it, they climbed

into the Thirty and sped homeward by way of the longer road, the speedometer showing twenty an hour.

The sun was very low now. The day and the week would soon be over—past and gone, forever. How had they been spent? No one asked the question, yet probably all thought of it in one way and another, and it's not a bad plan, either.

The boys passed the Tagg farm at quite moderate speed. Vigilantly they watched to discover, if possible, whether the household included someone whose shoes might have made the imprints found in the cornfield. But they looked in vain. The place had the same dreary air it seemed always to possess, with little sign of life and less sign of comfort or happiness anywhere about it. Still there was one object there, beneath an old pine tree, near the road, that, had it chanced to catch the eye of any one of the boys, would have interested all of them very much.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GREAT BALL GAME

The prospect of another night in the big, empty house and all that it might bring forth did not disturb the five friends much while daylight lasted. Even when darkness settled down and the quiet of the calm, country night was broken only by the chirp of an occasional cricket, the flicker of the little lamp in the old sitting-room and the melancholy whispering of the wind, it brought no fear or dread. There was only the thought that quite probably the pretended ghost would attempt new tactics and so disturb and annoy. Such likelihood was irritating rather than alarming. The boys wanted only to be let alone.

Some discussion took place in this connection, as to whether the fleeting figure, darting out of the cellar, was aware of having been seen. Dave felt certain the intruder had not noticed him.

The fellow had been so eager to escape that, in his haste, he looked neither to right nor left. He had fled up the cellar steps and then away at top speed. This being the case, he would suppose the boys to be quite at a loss to know who or what had come thumping up the cellar stairs. That he would so consider them greatly perplexed, and ready to admit the old house to be haunted appeared entirely probable.

“Whether it’s Tagg or some one sent by him, or even somebody else, I only hope he does think we’re badly scared,” said Billy Worth. “It will be all the easier to fool him if we get the chance. How would it be if we should pretend to be just about frightened out of a year’s growth, if anybody comes tonight?” he asked with sudden enthusiasm.

The plan was instantly approved by all. Then it was agreed that, at the usual time, they should go to bed and go to sleep or lie awake, as each was inclined. If any “ghost” came it would be allowed to approach just as near as it would. While feigning fright, the occupants of the old

house would at the same time have their eyes wide open. If possible they would discover, and if the opportunity came, capture the would-be "spook." They would have liked a plan to turn the tables on the intruder in some sudden and unexpected manner, but none that seemed feasible could be suggested.

Notwithstanding their brave agreement, it was with misgivings and anxiety that the lads left the little front portico together and made ready for bed. True, their talk and laughter were apparently cheery and care-free, and also amply loud; but if they so gave one another courage, and so made believe they didn't care if the "ghost" did come, the general effect was both wholesome and beneficial, at least. All humanity is the same. To think and talk fear not only makes but magnifies it; and no less surely do brave thoughts and words give courage and encouragement.

But no ghost, real or pretended—if there ever could be such a thing as a *real* ghost—made an appearance this night at the gray, old house

nestled among its trees and ragged shrubbery, weeds and grass, its toppling fences and its poor, overgrown, abandoned garden behind.

Some loose shingles rattled in the brisk breeze springing up, sometime far in the night, causing for a moment quite a thrill. Some workmen, from the railroad camp down the river, went noisily past at a late hour, homeward bound from Middle Run, and they, too, caused a general awakening; but otherwise the night went by without a sound of an alarming nature.

Nevertheless it was with real pleasure that the boys greeted the coming of another day. They were early astir to get themselves into proper attire for going to church, and if what they called the *necessity of bathing* was only an excuse for a plunge in the river this fine, warm Sunday morning, it is not for you or me to criticise. Who knows what we would have done had we been there?

Bright Eyes presented the main problem in the matter of conventional Sunday dress. He had been wearing one of Paul's old suits, and,

when not barefooted, shoes and stockings also belonging to Paul. Today the best that could be done was a combination of garments really more picturesque than becoming. Shoes and *long* black trousers belonging to Billy, too large for Little Mystery by two or three sizes, at least, were coupled with a blue shirt and white collar belonging to Phil—also much too large—and a gray flannel coat of Paul's.

Poor boy! He might much better have been left in the old, every-day suit he had been wearing, threadbare and faded though it was. Yet Phil, principally to blame for it all, certainly had none but the best intentions. Maybe he should have credit for that.

Bright Eyes was pretty doubtful as to the appearance he made, but if Way had told him it was all right, he would have worn anything. Then, too, he did feel quite pleased with the trousers. He had never worn long ones before.

Young Mr. Marble, very spruce in a dark suit, and shoes polished and shining like the very sun itself, met the boys as the Thirty rolled into

the grove beside the little white church. He made them all quite flustered by introducing them to everybody he possibly could, and that included a good many people. Being the mainstay of the chief grocery of the village, anyone not known to him could scarcely be of much account anyway.

But, after all, it was pleasant meeting such kind, cheerful people, all of whom were unselfishly interested, all hoping the outing at the old house was a pleasant one, and the like. It made the sermon about all the world being one great family, and all dependent on one another for love and happiness and comforts all the more convincing and impressive.

That Marble was delighted to take his first ride in an automobile need hardly be stated. He was so happy and pleasant that he made all the others even happier and in better spirits than they would have been otherwise. Only once did he speak unpleasantly of anything. When the car passed Jonas Tagg's house he remarked: "Don't doubt you've seen your neigh-

bor, Tagg. 'Bout the nearest thing to a miser we've got around here. There's a story that he beat Mr. Beaman out of his farm. Anything to it, Paul?"

This somewhat personal question was asked in such a friendly, disinterested way no one could take offense, Paul Jones least of all. He said he didn't know, but he wouldn't doubt anything.

Later on, after dinner was over, Marble had something further to say about Mr. Tagg. The dinner, by the way, was a great success, simple though it was. There were delicious little chops of spring lamb, baked potatoes, green corn and sliced tomatoes and bread and butter and coffee for the main part, and the watermelon, cooled in a bucket of water in the cellar over night, for dessert. All hands made short work of the dish washing and then, in the shade of the red astrakhan tree, close to the river bank, the six were soon very comfortably seated or lying on the soft grass.

Here it was that some reference to the rail-

road bridge being built below caused Marble to refer to Mr. Tagg again. "The old fellow's rich and going to be a lot richer," said he. "Rich, as far as money goes, anyhow, though that ain't very far either, if no one gets any good of it, I'm thinking."

There was general acquiescence in this sentiment and Spike continued: "This change they're making in the railroad gave him a whole lot of coin, or will give it to him when he can give a clear title to the land they're using. Don't just know where the hitch comes in, but anyhow Tagg hasn't got his money yet and the talk is that he and the railroad people will have to go into court, or have some kind of lawsuit or something, you know, before they'll be satisfied to fork over. He says the land's his an' they say they don't doubt it, but there's a hitch somewhere an' its been worrying Tagg a lot, they say."

"Papers in stone post," whispered Way to Jones, who was eagerly listening. The latter nodded.

"Where is the land the railroad wants?" Paul asked politely.

"Oh, just over here. Part of what your grandfather used to farm, I guess, ain't it?" said Marble. "It runs this way from the new bridge and they're going to have a big siding there. 'Bout thirty acres is what they want, Doc Wealthy said."

The temptation to tell their new friend of the strange inscription they had deciphered and of their search for the stone post it mentioned was strong upon the boys, but they had agreed, the previous day, to say nothing to anyone about these matters. Also had they concluded to keep to themselves the experience with the pretended ghost. But now when they began to understand the reason for Jonas Tagg's desire to coax or drive them away from the Beaman place—began to see that he feared they might find evidence showing the real ownership of the land the railway company wanted, the itching to tell Marble what they knew was almost uncontrollable.

Very likely it was just as well that Marble, himself, changed the subject of their conversation at about this point. Very likely it was just as well that the boys made no reference to their secret. The safe rule whenever there is any question as to the wisdom of talking is to keep silence. There was no reason for the boys doing otherwise in this instance. But no matter; Marble was now telling of some fine fish taken out of the river the previous spring. Also he described some of the best places for fishing at this later season of the year. So presently papers, stone post, ghosts and all were for the time forgotten.

In all respects Marble developed into a most likeable fellow, lank, large-eared, ungainly chap though he was. Only the sinking sun persuaded the boys to leave their talk and the river bank at last. Then came a trip in the Thirty taking Spike home to Middle Run by a roundabout way. Altogether it was a truly enjoyable ride in the soft air of the summer evening.

Arrangements to meet Marble and his base

ball team early the following afternoon were made before good-night was said. It was practically settled that Dave was to pitch the game for Middle Run. To be on the ground in good season for practice was therefore desirable.

“We’ve simply got to trim ’em! The crowd will be the biggest of the year,” declared Marble with solemn emphasis. Dave promised to do his best, and the car moved off.

By the shortest route the boys ran home. It was already dark and except for their gas lamps the road would have been difficult to find. And certainly no place ever looked darker than the old Beaman house as the Thirty turned into the drive.

Alone, any one of the boys might have been timid about entering, knowing though they did that nothing was there to harm them. Together, they had but the most fleeting thoughts of fear and the oil lamps of the car were soon lighting up the old sitting-room. Billy and Phil hurried away to bring fresh milk for a good, old-fashioned, Sunday evening lunch of bread and milk.

Dave put the car away and Paul, with Little Mystery's help, prepared fine, crisp young onions and cheese to accompany their repast.

The visit of Spike Marble and the prospect of an exciting ball game had come at a most opportune time. These took the boys' thoughts from less comfortable matters. Tonight the probability of having intruders was scarcely more than mentioned.

They did talk at some length about the papers in the stone post. Eagerly they speculated upon the possibility that somehow these papers would prove Jonas Tagg to be not the rightful owner of the land the railway company desired, but for which he appeared unwilling or unable to show his title. Might it not be, they insisted, that Grandfather Beaman had actually owned the acres to the south of the old house, after all,—the property that, after his death, Mr. Tagg had declared he only rented?

Oh! If those papers could only be found, what might they not reveal? Yet who could say that Tagg, himself, had not discovered them

long ago? Or, perhaps, knowing them to be in existence, somewhere, he feared to make a transfer of the land the railroad would occupy, lest discovery later on should convict him of swearing falsely. If this were the situation, what Tagg would most desire, undoubtedly, would be to get his hands upon these papers and destroy them.

“Just the same, though,” wisely counseled Phil Way at last, “we’ll make fools of ourselves, sure, if we build any great hope on anything important coming of this. All we have to go on is that Mr. Beaman hid some papers in a post. We don’t know what they are or what they amount to, and we don’t know where the post is, or that we can ever succeed in finding it. Maybe we’d better drop it all for now, anyhow, and get ready to turn in.”

The agreement to let any pretended ghost approach just as near as he would, should such a visit be received, had been renewed at supper. There was just a bare reference to the subject as Phil’s proposal to go to bed was acted upon;

and it is not too much to say that in twenty minutes, at most, not one of the five boys was anything but sound asleep. It had been a pleasant, helpful Sunday, well spent.

Whether the narrow margin by which the intruder of a couple of nights before escaped discovery, or even capture, kept him from repeating his visit was a question the boys discussed next morning. Certain it is he was not near the old house during the night; or, if so, he took pains that his presence should be unsuspected. In any event, it was too busy a day to spend much time speculating upon the subject.

The morning dip, breakfast and then some lively base ball practice occupied the time till ten o'clock. Then came the trip in the car to Middle Run. More practice work, especially for Dave, who made an instantly favorable impression with Marble's team, was followed by dinner at the village hotel.

The Wiltonites were on the grounds early, also. By two o'clock—the game was called for

two-thirty—both teams were in their suits and ready.

The diamond lay in the central portion of the fairgrounds, which were at the edge of the village. There were no other seats than the "bleachers" but these were full. Many people, also, were standing. There were probably four hundred men and women, boys and girls, in attendance. It was the largest crowd for a long time, Spike Marble said.

"Play ball!"

The umpire was Chris Lemly, a college chap from Sunfield. A hasty survey of the situation had shown him the strong feeling existing. From the first there was a ring of decision and precision in his tone. He was not the kind to tolerate interference.

Wilton was first at bat. The interest was intense.

"Ball one! Ball two!"

Dave MacLester was shooting them over fast and straight, but a little high.

"Strike one!" A wide out curve, squarely over the plate.

"Strike two!" Another in the same place. Dave was settling down.

Then came another wide out that started straight for the plate, but as the batter swung himself nearly off his feet, in a wild effort to "kill" it, the ball took a sudden curve onto the catcher's waiting mitt.

"Strike three!"

The batter had missed it by a foot. He was a chunky, young Wiltonite named Steller—one from whom much had been expected evidently. Venomously he dashed his bat to the ground and walked sheepishly to the bench.

Dave MacLester's Lannington "wrinkles," as Spike Marble gleefully called them, were going to prove puzzlers.

And now the Wilton visitors began their vocal efforts,—began and continued them and increased them. But they could no more confuse or unnerve Davie MacLester, cool, calm, collected young Scotchman that he was, than they

could shake the oaks in Fairgrounds park.

Wilton ended their half without a run. Only one man had reached first and that on a "Texas leaguer" to right. Without exception his companions had struck out.

The exulting yells of Middle Run were deafening and for the moment the demonstration of the Wilton sympathizers was suspended.

"Lannington's a large part of the show," said a voice at Way's shoulder, as the chums congratulated Dave. Phil turned to find the speaker their friend from the postoffice—the near-assistant postmaster-general.

"Pretty much, thank you," he laughed.

"No, you don't see what I mean," said the other, with a wave toward the pitcher's box.

And there, going through a great series of that type of extraordinary preparations usually called "grandstand," was—no one in the world but Sam Carew.

"Play ball!"

The first Middle Run man up sent a line drive to deep left that a professional would have been

glad to see, good for three bases and easily home a minute later. He trotted across the plate with the first run on the next batter's sharp single to right. The Middle Run crowd yelled itself hoarse.

The third man up took his base on balls, calmly waiting for four wide ones.

Poor Sam! He was getting wilder every minute. The taunting yells seemed to strike upon every nerve in his system. Even a Wilton man, a great giant of a fellow, who had brought a band-wagon load of young fellows with him, had commenced a noisy mutiny.

"Punk!" he yelled in a thunder-like voice easily heard everywhere, with every ball Carew sent up. And again and again, "Oh, punk!"

"Get the hook!" shouted a chorus of Middle Run youngsters zestfully, and the noisy cries of derision became general.

And thus the slaughter—and the word seems hardly too strong—continued. In the middle of the fourth inning Sam Carew was taken from

the box. It might almost be said he was dragged from it.

That he wasn't mobbed, the big fellow in the band-wagon said, was a disgrace to Wilton. "Great balls of wax!" he bellowed in his thundering way, "Why, to've heard him tell it, you'd ha' thought he was a Chicago whirlwind!"

Many people smiled at the rage of the noisy fellow, but there were four who smiled at the words quoted for another reason. Very well did Phil, Billy, Paul and Dave know the cause of the whole trouble. Sam's abominable habit of bragging and lying had done it. Taken at his own word, that he could pitch a strong game, he had not had the courage to admit his shortcomings nor the strength to resist the appeal to his vanity.

It was too late, of course, for Wilton to make headway against Middle Run's wild lead. Carew was replaced with their regular pitcher, who, though he still had a hand bandaged from an injury a week before, managed to hold the score down to ten to five.

Dave's work was good throughout, but fell a little short as his arm wearied toward the last.

There was a crowd around the automobile after the game. A score of strangers shook hands with MacLester. Spike Marble introduced at least as many others.

Phil had started the engine, ready to move off when the crowd and one or two horses showing signs of nervousness were out of the way. Bright Eyes was on the seat beside him, all but bubbling over with the excitement of the game and the joy of victory.

"And all lat Wilton man could yell wat ju't 'punk, punk, punk!' " he exclaimed gleefully. Phil laughed at the youngster's enthusiasm.

Sam Carew, unnoticed, was passing the car at the same moment. He stopped short. Turning violently, he strode up to the front of the machine. For a second he glared at the Boy really wickedly.

"Maybe you'll whistle out of the other side of your mouth, one of these days, my Jolly Roger," he snarled like a spoiled child, and walked away.

“Oh, punk!” ejaculated Little Mystery, contemptuously. But his merriment vanished instantly. Trembling, he grasped Phil’s arm.

With a savage look which this time included both occupants of the car’s front seat, Carew walked off before Way could speak.

CHAPTER XVII

TRAPPED

A number of days passed with no incident of special consequence to mar the outing of the four boys and the mysterious young person whose lot had been so strangely cast with theirs.

A spring of the Thirty had broken the night following the ball game, but considering the load—four in front and six in the tonneau—that wasn't very surprising. Luckily, too, a satisfactory repair was obtained in the village.

Only one possible indication that the pretended ghost might be expected to pay a second visit to the old house had been noticed. This was the tramp of footsteps on the back porch one evening. The boys were seated on the front door-steps. Twice they heard the sounds, but when they went to look no one was there. They suspected Jonas Tagg, himself, this time. The heavy, shuffling noise suggested his rubber boots

as their source, but there was no way of confirming the supposition.

At different times the search for the stone post, so briefly mentioned in the inscription on the ancient wooden leg, had been vigorously carried forward. It was without success. Paul had written nothing home regarding the deciphering of Grandfather Beaman's message, but now he had about concluded to do so.

All hoped his sister, Mrs. Wilby, would be able to give some information on the subject. The one objection to writing was the possibility of causing needless excitement; for, if the post could not be located, the fact that those crude figures had been interpreted, at last, would be of little importance.

But notwithstanding the calm which had followed the exciting incidents of the past week, the days were very fully occupied. Who would expect them to be anything but busy days? Full to the brim with their good times, enjoying to the utmost the out-door air and the activities

that made bed a welcome word at night, surely the Auto Boys had earned their pleasure.

As for Little Mystery, he shared in the fun with the others. Yet, as time went on, he seemed more and more frequently to lapse into his moods of sober reflection and melancholy. He had been more than frightened by Sam Carew's threatening language. He was worried. This showed plainly when one day, Paul, alluding to the incident, jokingly said, "You're going to whistle the other way, some day, my Jolly Roger." For the remainder of the afternoon the youngster was silent and sad.

Not a word concerning his past history had the Boy revealed. His daily life, his language, his little refinements,—such as the daily use of that toothbrush Phil had found, for instance,—bore sufficient evidence that he had come from some good environment, sometime. But when? And where? And why?

It was strange that no word had yet been received in answer to the inquiry to Washington regarding Ninth and One-Half street. Every

day the chums looked eagerly among the letters or other mail they received. Every day they were disappointed.

Nearly all of a week had slipped away. It was late Saturday afternoon when, on returning from Middle Run in the car, the boys saw Mr. Fifer leaning comfortably upon his front yard fence. His day's work was done and his early supper over. A hard-working farmer was Mr. Fifer and the lads saw little of him. Tonight he was at leisure and he smilingly accepted an invitation given by the boys to take a ride in the machine.

Away up the road, past the Tagg place a mile or more, they went. Coming back the same way, they persuaded Mr. Fifer to stop at the old house long enough to see if he could not recollect where he had seen the cannon-shaped stone post Grandfather Beaman made. They were curious to have a look at it, the boys had told him, which certainly was the truth. Mr. Fifer was willing to be accommodating, yet he couldn't remember just when or where he had noticed the

post last, and the more he tried, the less he appeared to succeed.

Taking this friendly neighbor home in the car, the boys were surprised, upon returning, to find Mr. Tagg just coming up from the opposite direction. He wanted to know how much longer they intended staying. He desired, also, to be informed what Mr. Fifer had been doing at the old house, though he tried to ask this question in an indirect and quite casual sort of way.

This visit from Mr. Tagg gave the boys their first certain suspicion that he watched their movements daily. However, they answered all his questions in a civil way. If they sought to indicate by their manner that they were not aware of the worry they were plainly causing him, such action was perhaps no more than the old fellow deserved.

Once again Mr. Tagg told the boys that the Beaman house was an unsafe place to stay. Once again he told them of his maple sugar camp, the sugar house itself, dry and clean, and plenty of blackberries in the woods all about.

He said he would be glad to have them to accept his offer, and that no strange noises would ever disturb anyone at night down among his maples.

It was surely a temptation to say to Mr. Tagg that such mere trifles as footsteps on the cellar stairs were not very alarming; or that make-believe ghosts sometimes departed a great deal faster than they came. Wisely, however, as will soon be apparent, no word was spoken that would show the disagreeable neighbor how little he accomplished in the deception he tried to carry on.

When he took his departure it was with a solemn shaking of his head and a savage frown. Plainly he would have relished nothing more than to have laid hands on the boys and in no very gentle manner. Perhaps he would have tried it had he dared.

The next day, Sunday, the boys again went to church. This time, however, Little Mystery had a brand new suit to wear. What matter if it did cost only two dollars and sixteen cents? It was whole and clean. In fit it was fairly good

and certainly it was becoming. And he was such a bright, attractive chap, anyway. No wonder people always looked the second time after first seeing him.

Spike Marble had asked all five of the boys to his home for Sunday dinner. It was very pleasant to sit at a snowy-white table once more; very pleasant to partake of chicken pie and home fixings, delicious at any time, but hardly possible in camp life. Billy Worth said it was decidedly agreeable, for a change, too, to eat a dinner which someone else had prepared.

Mrs. Marble was quite as well pleased with the boys as were they with her. Mr. Marble, also, made himself agreeable and their tall son was even more than usually pleasant. In all respects the time passed pleasantly.

Going home in good season, the lads met on the road Sam Carew and his friend Kalie, with whom he was staying. They were midway between the village and the Beaman place. Apparently they were returning from a walk and nothing further was thought of the circum-

stance at the time; but when Billy and Paul went to the Fifer place for milk and Mrs. Fifer said two boys had for some time loitered near the old farmhouse, and had thrown stones at the house and barn, it was easy to guess who they were.

What did Sam Carew mean by such tactics? Had he and Kalie just chanced to walk in that direction? Had they just vented their spite, on an impulse of the moment, by throwing stones, or had they deliberately set out to make trouble?

"Let's not bother about it at all," Phil Way counseled. "If Sam means mischief we'll find it out in plenty of time. He hasn't done much harm, so far, except to himself."

This view of the matter appeared the sensible one. Presently the subject was dropped, but not until after considerable speculation on the part of Paul and Dave as to whether Carew might not have been on a visit to Jonas Tagg. Their only reason for connecting him with that individual was their dislike of both. Yet, as

Billy suggested, perhaps the most remarkable part of this theory lay in the fact that Paul and Dave for once agreed perfectly, though no one agreed with them.

It was not yet sundown when the usual Sunday evening lunch was over. Phil was writing letters and Billy and the Boy lay under a maple reading. Dave and Paul, looking in the roadway, found in the dust footprints of Carew and his friend. Calling to Worth that they were going to see if these two had been at Tagg's place, they began to trace the tracks. Their efforts were attended by little success. Still they wandered farther and farther along the road.

"May as well give it up," said Paul.

"Let's go 'cross lots and see the new railroad," Dave answered, and in another minute the two were over the roadside fence, picking their way through the tall corn in the direction of the river.

The scientific engineering terms Dave could almost, but not quite, remember as he tried to

explain the construction of a great railroad bridge, are at this time immaterial. Neither does it matter that Jones concluded engineering would be a pretty good profession to take up, and that it probably paid pretty handsomely.

The important facts, just now, are that the two boys started homeward; that they walked through the tall corn; that they were going along silently and quietly in the dusk of twilight and that they suddenly became aware of the presence of a third person in the cornfield and at no great distance from them.

Was it an inborn instinct of primal man, long accustomed to hunting and being hunted, that prompted the two boys instantly to stoop low and watch and listen? This, at any rate, is what they did do. Their observations were interesting.

A dark figure, showing but imperfectly, yet fairly recognizable, in the dusk, was dragging a light ladder through the corn. Under his arm was a bundle,—something white. The figure was that of a stockily built young man of twen-

ty-one or twenty-two years, dressed in dark coat and trousers and a soft shirt of a lighter hue. He wore shoes but no hat.

When the figure had moved forward some distance the two boys moved forward also. Stealthily as Indians they kept the man with the ladder within hearing all the time and within view a part of the time. Steadily he advanced and as he was headed directly toward the orchard, at the foot of the overgrown garden, the natural inference was that he meant to help himself to apples. Perhaps the white bundle under his arm was a sack to put them in.

If these were the intentions of the young man, he at least was in no hurry; for, when only a row or two of corn separated him from the rail fence beyond which the orchard lay, he put his burden down and, after peering intently toward the old farmhouse for a minute or two, from the very edge of the cornfield he returned and sat himself down upon the ladder with the white bundle for a cushion.

For probably ten minutes Dave and Paul

watched as the mysterious individual thus sat, apparently awaiting something—the deeper darkness, perhaps. They scarcely dared to whisper, scarcely dared to breathe. At last Jones crept softly away, beckoning Dave to follow.

“That fellow’s up to something. We’ve got to let the others know where we are, then come back and watch him,” he said when they were well beyond being heard.

“S’pose so. It’s a wonder Phil hasn’t been yelling for us before now, dark as it is,” was the answer. “If anything like that happened, likely ’twould scare the man away right off.”

It was no trouble for Paul and Dave to agree when alone together. They were of one mind, at once, in this instance. In a very little time they had stolen quietly up to the public road. Rapidly and quietly, also, they approached home along that thoroughfare.

“I don’t know about that,” said Phil Way when, breathlessly, Paul had told of the discovery, Dave adding: “He’s after the apples.

Maybe he's some hand from the railroad camp."

"I may be clear wrong but that white bundle—it makes me think he's going to play ghost!" declared Way.

"Whew! I never thought of that!" cried MacLester in an excited undertone. "And now it makes me think! I believe,—I honestly believe, fellows, he's the same man I saw skip out of the cellar that night!"

That any move to keep eyes on the thief or would-be ghost, or whatever he was, must be made quickly was apparent. Immediately it was agreed that Dave and Paul should return to the cornfield and continue their observations. Their friends, meanwhile, should remain at the house, have the lamps lighted as usual, and in all ways bear themselves as if neither knowing nor thinking of anything out of the ordinary. In this manner must they await further information.

"And don't keep us waiting a bit longer than you have to, either," admonished Billy, as the two boys slipped softly out of the front door.

"We'll be listening and can hear you yell, if

anything happens," Phil called after them; but already the darkness had closed in on the two. Only a half audible, "You bet," came out of the shadows.

It was with some difficulty that Dave and Paul returned to the spot where the mysterious man was last seen by them. Indeed, they might have been unable to come upon him without betraying themselves but for the white bundle. The darkness was deeper now, among the corn, especially.

As has been indicated, it was the white bundle that at last caught Dave's eye. Even when they had crept quite close, however, the owner of that piece of baggage was not to be seen. Where had he gone?

Ah! there he was! Some movement he made revealed his whereabouts as he leaned on the fence just beyond the edge of the corn. His face was turned toward the house, only a few hundred feet away, as if he watched it closely. Now and again he shifted his position, but for the most part he was as motionless as he was silent.

Thus the minutes passed. An hour dragged by. The watchers in the cornfield grew weary and impatient, and even more so and anxious, too, were those who tried to talk in ordinary tones and conduct themselves in an entirely ordinary manner in the exceeding quiet of the old house.

“Wish we had him hitched to one of those derricks over at the new bridge, and steam up, to work it!” growled Paul in a whisper of impatience and disgust. “Maybe he wouldn’t move some, then!”

Had the fellow heard? His sudden movement toward the cornfield and his listening attitude seemed to say so. But, no, he suspected nothing. If any sound had reached him, he seemed to attribute it to the murmur of the breeze among the gently waving blades, for he advanced quite confidently to his bundle and his ladder.

As has been stated, the ladder, though of good length, was light. The young man, being strong, hung it over his shoulder in such a way that it balanced nicely. Then with his white sack

or sheet,—whatever the bundle was,—in his free hand, he moved cautiously forward in the shadow of the corn, and in the direction of the house. Following at a safe distance, Dave and Paul observed the fellow's every move. He appeared entirely familiar with his surroundings, and little needed to watch his footsteps for he kept his eyes always on the dwelling. Only twice or thrice did he pause, as if suspicious that his course was not clear. Once, also, he looked back. Each time, however, he seemed satisfied and continued on as before. So did he soon come to the little group of pear trees at the garden corner. In their shadow he slowly climbed the fence.

Always close behind came the two boys. They were not ten yards distant from the man when they crept under, rather than over, the fence and for a few seconds lay concealed in the grass. Moving forward, then, to the shelter of the row of currant bushes, they saw the strange fellow draw near the house.

Carefully the ladder was raised to the window

of the low attic over the kitchen and the woodshed. Going to peep around one corner, then another, toward the front of the dwelling, the young man spent perhaps five minutes. Then he returned and quickly mounted his ladder and raised the window. With the white bundle still under his arm he crept inside.

“He’s the ‘ghost’ as sure as shootin’!” gasped Dave, astonished and frightened.

“We’ve got him! *We’ve got him!*” was the eager, excited answer. “Let’s take the ladder down!”

Oh, Paul, what a fine suggestion was that! And in another three minutes the thing was done.

With what caution they could, in their excitement, the two lads hastened around the house and entered the old sitting-room.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT THE MAN IN THE ATTIC TOLD

Darkness in the old farmhouse, save for the dim light of one automobile lamp, turned low. Darkness in the big yard in front, in the forsaken garden and all out-doors. The hour grows late. For a long time all has been quiet.

The creaking of a board breaks upon the silence. The sound of feet in solemn, measured tread comes suddenly from the attic.

“Now he’s going to begin!”

It is Paul Jones speaking, his voice a whisper. Instantly he puts his hands to his mouth to drown his merriment.

Again that slow and measured tread in the attic, and the loud rattle of a loose board.

“Goodness, he’s likely to go through the plaster into the kitchen!” giggles Billy Worth, suppressing not his merriment, but the noise thereof, as best he can.

“We’re supposed to be just waking up now, and scared forty different ways,” was Phil’s comment.

Again came the footfalls in the low, garret room above, and this time a very audible groan. It sounded quite frightful enough, but it frightened no one, notwithstanding. Or if it did, the evidence thereof was most peculiar.

Billy Worth and Paul lay on a blanket, shaking with internal laughter. Phil and the Boy were on their own bed, also abandoning themselves to mirth of every description possible without noise. Quite unable to restrain himself, Bright Eyes’ convulsive giggles every few seconds broke forth in low sounds like water gurgling from a jug. Dave lay on the bed on the floor he and Billy usually occupied, a large part of a pillow stuffed in his mouth, his body wriggling, his delight all but uncontrollable.

For half an hour this extraordinary performance continued.

"Gosh, he's comin' downstairs!" whispered Paul.

The footsteps now were certainly on the stairway.

"It's all right! The stair door's bolted on this side! I saw to that," Worth answered.

Slowly and more slowly the sounds upon the stairs advanced. The measured, heavy tread was surely intended to be ghostly. It was not hard to picture the white-robed figure, groping its way (in a very un-spirit-like fashion) through the darkness—a figure whose eyes, unfortunately, could not penetrate the thick, oak door—could not see how vastly worse than wasted were the ghost-like noises for which it was responsible.

A rapping, gentle at first, then more severe, upon the attic door, was followed by a really terrible moaning sound. It was too much. Paul Jones' laughter escaped restraint entirely. He laughed loudly and he laughed long. The very contagion of his unsuppressed merriment let

loose the mirth of the other boys and the large room rang with it all.

The effect upon the white-robed figure in the attic stairway must have been both surprising and painful. That he was discovered, the pretended ghost no doubt quickly guessed; but that he had been discovered long ago, and that there was no ladder awaiting him at the window, he had yet to learn. In chagrin and fear he made all haste he could up the dark stairs.

Now Paul Jones' gleeful but noisy outburst had not been according to program at all. The plan had been to let the would-be ghost perform all the antics of a so-called ghostly character within his knowledge or imagination. He would get tired at last, undoubtedly. Being then ready to descend his ladder, he would find out something.

The change of program made necessary by the certain hint given the person in the attic that his efforts were lost, called for prompt action. Reassuring themselves that the door into the stairway was securely bolted, the boys

rushed out to observe the interesting proceedings they had good reason to believe would soon take place at the garret window.

They were in no sense disappointed. A measure of delight and exultation known to no other kind of creature was theirs. For scarcely had they reached the rear of the woodshed when, keeping as quiet as they reasonably could, they heard the self-constituted ghost shuffling toward the window. Warily he drew near. He put out his arm and felt about in the darkness for the ladder. Evidently he was considerably puzzled. Not finding what he sought at one side, his hand next went groping about at the other. His movements were both quick and confused now. He was getting considerably excited.

Presently the hand and arm were withdrawn from the window and two seconds later a light appeared. The fellow had struck a match. Holding it before him, he leaned far out, as if to see whether his ladder had fallen to the ground. At the same moment a shout of mirth and laughter greeted him. The surprise and

consternation shown on his face, in the light of the match he held, were surely interesting. It is doubtful if Indians ever gave vent to a more zestful yell of victory than that which his utter amazement now produced.

But no answer came from the vanquished "ghost." Perhaps that personage was doing some pretty lively thinking. There was every reason to suppose so, as the boys watched and waited, but heard or saw nothing more of him.

As a matter of fact, the young man in the attic was making his way rapidly and quietly to the stairway. He would escape down the steps and out through the house, before his intentions were suspected, he thought.

What must have been the fellow's chagrin to reach the door, plunge violently against it in his haste, find it locked and again hear the screaming laughter that followed. He had been badly mistaken in supposing that his plan would not be suspected.

"Open the door, now, you young mutton heads!" The demand came sharp and angry.

The laughter ceased, but the captive ghost really should have known better, by this time, than to have tried to frighten the captors by any such method. In substance Phil Way promptly told him so. Paul Jones added that it was time to go to bed, and if the fellow would be quiet, maybe he would be let out in the morning.

So for some time the threats and banter were kept up in lively exchange. By degrees, however, the prisoner "got some sense"—at least that was what Paul called it. He was willing to make any kind of treaty and on any kind of terms.

"We'll let you out," said Phil, "and let you go back to Mr. Tagg before he finds out what a monkey you've made of yourself; but you have first got to tell us who you are and why you came here and a few other things we want to know."

While the boys had all along suspected that Mr. Tagg was at the bottom of the attempts to frighten them, they had had no positive proof.

Phil's reference to that old fellow, and his certain tone, must have convinced the prisoner, however, that his captors *knew* that Tagg had sent him. He assented to the terms offered; would tell anything, he said, if the boys would but promise not to tell Mr. Tagg.

"All right then. We won't tell him unless we have to for our own protection or other important reason," Phil agreed.

"And if you try to lie to us, the bargain's off and you stay cooped up till we get good and ready to let you out, you see," Billy Worth put in.

"I'll give you everything straight. I wouldn't lie to anybody," protested the captive ghost, impatiently. But considering that he undoubtedly had in mind, at that moment, the lying he would do when he reported to Mr. Tagg, his statement was certainly subject to a large discount.

"Go ahead! Tell us all about this ghost business, first," commanded Phil.

The prisoner lost no time. That he was in a

great hurry to get away was, indeed, very apparent. His name was Kalie, he said, and he was employed by Mr. Tagg for the summer. The latter claimed to be afraid the boys staying in the old house might set that or other buildings on fire. At any rate he desired that they leave. He had given Kalie a dollar for playing ghost in the cellar, several nights earlier. When he found that that had not frightened the visitors, he contrived the plan of having a ghost in the attic. Again he sent Kalie, offering him another dollar. The latter, who had been in the vacant house and knew its arrangement, was willing to earn the money.

"Oh, well, Tagg has some other reason for wanting to scare us off," asserted Dave, in positive tones. "What is it?"

"Honest, I don't know," came the voice through the door. "He acts as if he owned the Beaman place, that's all. Some folks thought maybe he did, afore you chaps come."

"How's that?" inquired Phil.

"Now mind, you promised not to tell," the

prisoner replied, getting more and more impatient and protesting, "and what I'm going to say would just about get me killed if he knew it. Tagg's been helping himself to things around this place. He carried off mor'n half the garden fence to fix his own, and he got a fork and a hoe out of the barn. He comes down here frequent an' looks all around for things. There was half a cord o' stove wood in the shed an' he took that."

"Go on. What else?" from Phil.

"Honest, I don't know — — — —"

"Oh, speak up, in there!" called Paul Jones, imperiously. "Talk louder!"

"How in thunder can I? Pretty near suffocated in this hole!" testily came the answer. The late "ghost" seemed to be getting irritated.

"Paul, you be quiet," Captain Phil commanded. "Now, now, go on, brother; what else did Tagg get?"

"He got a whet-stone out of the tool shed—and, yes, I remember now, he got a big stone

hitching post, too. Honest Injun, I don't know anything more."

If the door had not prevented, Mr. Tagg's young man might have been quite surprised to see the interested looks exchanged at the mention of a stone hitching post.

"Oh, he got a fork and a hoe, and a whetstone and a hitching post, did he? What became of them?"

Phil was after information very earnestly now—so earnestly he only feared his voice might betray his anxiety.

"Took 'em home with him," the young man answered, again showing decided impatience. Then in a more conciliating tone: "The fork and hoe was both about done for, but he's got 'em in his corn-crib. The post was made to look like a cannon and was all right to put in front of a house. But it had never been used till Tagg set it up there by his gate. None o' the things was worth much. He got apples here, too, but they was goin' to waste. Now, hang it, that's all! And don't you ever squeal on me or—I've

done my part! Now let me out of this hole!"

"What are you going to tell Mr. Tagg about what's happened?" inquired Phil.

"I—I don't know."

"You tell him that you didn't scare us very much, will you? We don't care what else, if you'll let him know that."

"Yes, I'll tell him it was no go. I'll tell him to let you stay here; that you're all right, and won't hurt a thing."

This answer being satisfactory, and Phil fearing to make any closer inquiry about the stone post, much as he wished to do so, the door was opened.

With a decidedly sheepish look the young man stepped blinkingly into the light of the auto lamp. His captors grinned good-naturedly.

"How do you do?" said Paul Jones.

"How did ye happen to get wise?" the fellow asked with a rather sickly grin in response. "I was afraid you might find that ladder."

"You a brother of the Kalie in Middle Run, a chap named Carew is visiting?" This inquiry

from Billy gave the unhappy failure in the ghost business a sudden thought.

"Blame those two little rummies!" he exclaimed, angrily, "they told you! They told you this afternoon! If I don't—"

"Don't get excited. Perhaps they didn't tell us anything. You wouldn't believe it even if we told you they didn't, I suppose; but I'll say this: They did not tell us a word, if it's Carew and the other Kalie that you mean." Phil's voice rang true, but, as he foresaw, he was not believed.

"Well, I'll—But never mind! Where'd you put that ladder? I've got to lug it back."

Dave told the young man where his property would be found. He gathered up the sheet which lay at the foot of the attic stairs and with, "Don't you blab to Tagg! You promised me fair," he hurried away.

The boys strolled after him to see if he found his ladder readily, and heard him mumbling. It was possible he was speaking to himself regarding his younger brother and Mr. Samuel Carew.

At any rate the few words the boys caught led them so to believe, and his expressions were not exceedingly complimentary.

With his ladder on his shoulder the elder of the Kalie brothers soon turned himself in the direction of the residence of Jonas Tagg; which pleasant individual he informed, within the next half hour, that his mission had been an astonishing success and that the Auto Boys were "simply scared stiff."

Whereupon Mr. Tagg said: "U-h-h-m! I'll give ye the dollar when the lambs is sold next month. Been waitin' for you more'n half the night! 'Twon't hurt you none to do some wait-in' fer yer money!"

Although the auto clock presented by Duck Neely, which was the official timepiece of the party, marked the hour of midnight, sleep was little thought of by the five boys.

"The time to act is this very night," declared Phil, with earnest confidence. "If Tagg has been sitting up to hear what Kalie did—or, most likely, what he didn't do,—they'll all be in

bed and asleep pretty shortly. If we're going to have a look into that post at all, then, it might as well be right away."

As this declaration followed quite a lengthy discussion of the information gained by the night's adventure, there was little to do but accept or reject the proposal. Quite promptly, therefore, it was accepted and the plan in detail, within a short time, completed.

As a means of rapid traveling the Thirty, minus lamps or lights of any description, should be run up as near to the Tagg residence as practicable without being heard, then turned around to head homeward. Leaving one in charge, and the engine running but completely muffled, the others would slip up to the post and carefully dig it out of the ground. They would find, they believed, some plug, possibly of wood, in the bottom end, concealing the hiding place of Grandfather Beaman's papers.

If this obstruction could be at once removed, or if by any means the papers could be obtained immediately, the post would be returned to

place and no one would be the wiser if the earth were carefully packed down about it. Otherwise, by means of a long rope hitched to the car, the post must be dragged to the Beaman place to be broken open.

“I tell you, fellows, this thing would never do if the post belonged to Mr. Tagg to begin with,” reasoned Phil Way. “But it doesn’t and never did.”

To this there was general assent. Perhaps Phil and the others as well were really speaking for the sake of the salve so applied to their own consciences. Undoubtedly they realized that their plan was open to criticism.

True, the post was not Mr. Tagg’s property, but it would have been much better in every way had the boys consulted older heads than their own at this juncture instead of later.

CHAPTER XIX

WHAT THE STONE POST CONTAINED

“One thing’s sure, it isn’t Sunday any more but Monday morning, even if it is dark as Egypt,” observed Phil, as noiselessly the Thirty rolled out of the drive. “Just what time was it when we started, Billy?”

Perhaps Way’s conscience was still a bit uneasy. At any rate, he and all were better pleased that they were not undertaking this expedition on a Sunday night. They were glad to hear Worth answer that, if in Lannington, they would hear the town clock strike one in less than five minutes.

Where a lane joined the main thoroughfare a favorable place for turning the car offered, and, having been headed toward the Beaman house, the machine was left standing well to one side in the dense shadows of a clump of oaks.

By drawing cuts it had been decided, before

leaving home, who should remain in the car. The place had fallen to Dave, and Bright Eyes remained with him—not because he preferred, but because Phil thought he better do so. Like a little major he swallowed his disappointment. Indeed, grumbling and complaining seemed to be things of which this remarkable youngster had no knowledge. Or was it because he was too manly, young as he was, to practice them?

With picks and spade, Phil, Billy and Paul hurried forward. The late moon was just rising above the eastern trees and hills, but the skies were cloudy and the pitch darkness would be but little relieved.

Their eyes being now well accustomed to the night, however, the three boys could distinguish objects about them readily. With but little difficulty they located and crept to the tall hitching post of artificial stone.

“It’s the cannon-shaped post, all right! Feel how round it is, and how it tapers!” Phil whispered.

Yes, there could be no doubt that this was the

post Grandfather Beaman had made and of which Mr. Fifer had spoken. Was it the one to which the inscription on the wooden leg of the old soldier made reference? That was the question—a question that would be answered in some way soon. The earth was yielding to the pick and spade rapidly and almost noiselessly.

It was exciting, nerve-trying, hard work nevertheless.

The post stood under an old pine tree near the front gate of the Tagg dooryard,—or where the gate had been at one time. The house, standing near the road, was scarcely more than sixty feet away. Little wonder that every scraping twig, every rustling of the branches above, every rooster's crow, sounded loud; sounded like the opening of a door; sounded exactly like the raising of a window; sounded so much like someone creeping up in the darkness that the temptation to quit and run,—the impulse to give way to utter panic and wildly flee must be resisted every quarter minute.

More and more the heavy post leaned from its perpendicular. At last it was quite loose. A great pull, a strong pull and a pull all together would lift it out of the ground.

“Now!”

The tug of the six strong arms united in one great effort at the whispered command. Up came the post, but too heavy to be held, down it went with a thud. The heap of freshly excavated earth broke the noise of its fall, but the rattle of some dry branches, at the same moment, all but sent the three boys flying. Fortunately they stood their ground.

“Can’t make out any hole in the bottom,” said Paul Jones, under his breath. “Will have to hitch the car onto it.”

“Yes, Phil, let’s do it,” urged Billy, for now a dog was barking somewhere far off in the darkness. The sound was a half mile away at the very least, but who could tell what had started the canine up?

“All right, come on,” Way answered, glad of the relief from the nerve-breaking strain.

"We'll hitch the rope long as we can," Paul suggested as the car was backed slowly toward the Tagg residence.

"Huh! There's only twenty feet of it!" growled Billy. "Wish there were a thousand!"

Oh! What a racket the car seemed to make! Some horses in the field opposite the Tagg dwelling were getting inquisitive, too. It was certainly a trying moment!

The rope had been fastened to the machine, and a running noose made in its other end while still the car was at an ample distance from the house. It was but the work of a few seconds, now, to slip the loop over the post and draw it tight.

Gently the car moved off. The rope pulled taut, the old stone post began to move. Grandfather Beaman's papers would be found now, or they would probably never be found at all.

"You can't tell which," said Phil.

"No, I know you can't, but—" said Paul, hopefully, yet leaving the sentence unfinished. They were half way home with their booty.

"If we had only filled that hole up, might be the post wouldn't be missed for quite a while," mused Billy Worth.

"You've a head on you, Billy. The very thing!" Phil exclaimed. "Come on. You and I will go back."

The thing was done. The spot where the post had stood was still well marked, of course, but with fallen pine needles scattered over the fresh earth, it might not be very noticeable, after all.

"And besides, the post isn't Tagg's anyway," reiterated Phil for the twentieth time.

"He'll see the trail where it dragged, anyhow. He'll be after us, as sure as shootin', Phil," Worth declared.

There was good reason to suppose that Billy was right. Certainly the deep impression where the heavy object was drawn along the dusty road could be easily seen and easily followed the moment daylight came.

However, good fortune for which the lads had not even hoped was to be theirs. The

clouds had rolled up strong from the southwest. Before Phil and Billy had reached their friends again it was gently raining.

"We pulled over to one side," said Dave, explaining the reason of the car being almost in the ditch. "The blessed post rolled clear into the gutter, but I guess it will pull out all right." But MacLester's guess was all wrong. With the starting of the machine the heavy piece of crude cement work was thrown against the corner of a large stone projecting from the earth. Being already weakened, it broke squarely in two.

The car was stopped and an inspection made.

"By Jimminy!" came Paul Jones' excited undertones, out of the darkness, "the old thing is *hollow*, at any rate!"

"Where's the pick? Let's break it further, right here!" called Phil quietly, but enthusiastically.

A few sharp blows completed the work the projecting stone had started. A sharp rattle of tin among the fragments was followed by

Paul's joyous cry: "We've got it, fellows, we've got it! It's a long, round tin box. Feels like one of those old tea cannisters, but longer," he exclaimed exultingly, the prize in his hands.

"Let's see!" "Let's see!" and a great many other expressions of the most excited and ecstatic description instantly followed.

Perhaps a score, or maybe more, of exclamation points would tell about it all better than words themselves, as the five boys huddled together, inspecting as well as the darkness permitted the long-concealed treasure of the hollow post.

As Paul had instantly stated the discovery was in the form of a long, round tin box. It was a simple affair with such a lid as any tin box or can might have. Inside were papers. Their nature or importance could not, of course, be determined. But those words, "Papers in stone post," must certainly mean something of some consequence. Also, why should Grandfather Beaman or anybody wish to conceal

documents of no particular significance or value?

“By Ginger! Maybe Sister Emma won’t open *her* eyes some! Maybe John Wilby won’t sit up and take notice when he hears about *this*! I just can’t wait till we get a light to see what it all means!”

Paul had been making just such exclamations in a wildly excited, disconnected way for five minutes at least. The rain was coming down in a steady drizzle now, but he would scarcely have taken notice had it snowed.

Cool, practical Dave MacLester was different. “When you fellows get time to hear me I’ll just remark that it’s raining some. Don’t s’pose there’s any question but what we *know* enough to go in; but the point is, why don’t we then?”

“How about the post? How do we know we’ve got everything out of it?” asked Billy, seriously. “Let’s gather up the pieces and take ’em along. Better not leave them right by the road here, anyway, I imagine.”

Acting on this suggestion, the boys felt about

for all the fragments of the post, both large and small, and loaded them into the tonneau. Still thrilling with their discovery they made haste to the old house.

Bright Eyes had spoken but little during the excitement of the find, but was as eager as any to see how important the papers might be.

"You see it will be a dandy thing for Paul and for his sister if the papers show there is property belonging to them," said Phil as he and the Youngster sat side by side.

"I just hope there's a million dollars for his sister and another for Paul," cried the lad.

"What! What's that you said?" exclaimed Phil, the others also instantly giving attention to catch the repetition of the words.

"Oh, I get you heard," Master Mystery answered with confusion.

"Sure, we heard, Jack, but we never heard you speak *that* way before," said Phil gayly.

"Never did 'peak like lat before. I can't," was the sober answer.

And although Bright Eyes himself seemed as

much surprised as any of the others that, unconsciously, he had suddenly pronounced the sounds of *S* and *TH* he declared his inability to do the same thing again.

No doubt the excitement had caused it—caused the youngster to speak as others were speaking, though not in his usual manner at all. Stranger things have happened, in times of sudden danger, sudden joy or deep and quick appeal to the emotions.

Or was the strange Boy acting every day a part with his speech which he had momentarily forgotten to use? Some such question as this came to the minds of the chums. They could scarcely imagine their strange friend speaking quite like other people. In a careless, half-defined, boyish way they realized that when he did come at last to do so, as some day he surely would, he could never seem quite the same boy again. They would like him just as well; but he would be different, and somehow more nearly of an age with them than they had ever yet felt him to be.

By the light of an auto lamp and a little fire soon kindled on the wide, brick hearth,—for the rain made the night air cold, and there were wet clothes to be dried, too,—the tin box and its contents were inspected. The latter consisted of a number of papers,—a couple of fire insurance policies, a bundle of tax receipts, the honorable discharge of Grandfather Beaman from the army and a few others,—records of yields of grain on certain fields, and the like. Among them, however, was one envelope tightly sealed and addressed “To My Granddaughter, Emma Jones.”

“That’s the main thing, Paul,” said Phil Way. “These others may be important, but the next move, I should say, is to send that envelope to your sister.”

Paul sat on the floor before the fire, his legs crossed. The others were grouped about him, while he opened up one paper after another. And now the sealed envelope was the only one left.

“Yes, we must send or take that to Lanning-

ton, right away," he said. "Maybe I could go on the train. It wouldn't cost—How much do you suppose the fare would be to Lannington?"

"We'll find out at the Run in the morning," was Phil's reply.

"In the morning! It's morning now and getting daylight!" ejaculated Billy. "Let's get some sleep!"

It was certainly a wise proposal. In every direction the roosters were crowing and the pale light on the eastern sky heralded the coming of another day.

"I suppose we can put what's left of the stone post away when we get up," said Phil. "But I'd put all the papers back in the box and put that in some good place, Paul."

"Yep," the young gentleman addressed answered sleepily.

Now that their excitement was for the time over, all the boys felt weariness creep fast upon them. The rain was still falling and the warmth of the fire-place was pleasant; but it was conducive to drowsiness, also. Leaving the door

wide open, as they had often done before, they crept into their beds.

Paul had placed the box with its precious papers in a small, closed cupboard built into the wall beside the fireplace. Grandmother Beaman probably kept her knitting there,—likewise her workbasket, and all such little things as she would frequently be using years ago. At any rate it was a handy place. It seemed safe enough, too, for the purpose to which it was now put. Often the boys had been away from the house for practically all day. They never locked the door. And they had never missed one thing from among their belongings.

It was a tired and drowsy lot of boys who crept out of their beds only an hour later than their usual time! But there was too much to be done to permit of their sleeping longer, as Phil emphatically observed, a half dozen times at least, before Billy was fully persuaded of the fact.

For one thing, there were the remnants of the stone post to be disposed of. A careful in-

spection was first made of them in a search for something of value which might have been overlooked in the darkness. Nothing being found, the fragments of broken cement work were thrown back of some tall, bushy asparagus at the end of the woodshed.

Breakfast was, of course, the next thing in order, but hearty, even if not elaborate, lunches after the return from the night's expedition, had taken the edge from usual keen appetites. This number in the morning's program then, partially for the reason stated, and largely because other things were considered more highly important, occupied but little time. The morning swim had been omitted altogether.

"If it doesn't cost too much, one of us might go along home with you, Paul," Phil said, as the Thirty rumbled smoothly over the river bridge toward Middle Run. Paul wished some one would go, and said so. He wished they could all make the trip in the car and then return to the old house again to finish their vacation.

Phil thought well of this plan till Billy, with a wink, suggested that an important letter was expected to reach Middle Run at any minute.

“That’s so,” he said with a glance at Bright Eyes. The latter caught this reference to a letter—some letter about which he had not been taken into confidence. He had heard a considerable number of such allusions. His eyes said as much as they met Way’s at this moment.

It would be a slow and round-about trip to Lannington by rail. This was the information obtained at the Middle Run station. The A. & F., the only road touching the village, wasn’t a trunk line by a considerable margin. Only one of its two or three daily trains went so far as South Falls where a connection to reach Lannington could be made. The fare would be nearly seven dollars.

“Maybe we better mail the letter to my sister,” Paul proposed. “A fellow can do a lot of work and get less than seven dollars for it.”

“Or go home in the machine, same as we talked about awhile ago,” put in Billy.

By this time the Thirty was standing in front of the Middle Run post office. Phil had gone inside. Bright Eyes, Billy and Paul were in the tonneau, Dave in the driver's seat.

"It's here. We've got an answer to our letter, anyhow," said Way happily, coming out of the little frame building. Again he glanced at the Boy.

There was more than a touch of resentment, defiance—or was it injured feelings?—in the younger lad's eyes. Did he suspect that the letter might refer to him or was he only hurt that the others knew about some matter of interest and importance of which he was kept in ignorance?

Phil wondered about it. The mistake he made, though, and the mistake the others made, was in their failure to appreciate how quick of perception and capable of reasoning the little stranger was.

It most certainly would not do to open the letter from Washington in the presence of the Boy. No opportunity to see its contents would

easily be found until home was reached. So, after deciding to talk over, later on, the matter of driving the car through to Lannington, the lads headed for the Beaman place.

A stop was made at the grocery to buy some supplies, and see Spike Marble for a minute. The greetings of that slim young man were followed with the intelligence that the outing party would now have Sam Carew for a neighbor. Sam and Joe Kalie, Marble said, were going to spend some time at Jonas Tagg's. Kalie's older brother, Dan, was working for Mr. Tagg and the two boys were going to remain with him, while Mr. and Mrs. Kalie were away for a few days.

"Very fine!" said Billy Worth. "They were out our way yesterday. We didn't know until just lately that anybody named Kalie belonged at the Tagg farm."

"Why, we just found it out last night," put in Paul Jones, with that exceedingly good-natured grin of his. "He was over to see us and stayed quite awhile."

CHAPTER XX

A SEVERE BLOW TO THE AUTO BOYS

Although the sky had cleared during the morning, the roads were still muddy from the night's rain. The longer road home from Middle Run was the better one, as has been previously explained. To take this course, however, meant to pass the Tagg farm.

"Who cares?" demanded Billy. "We can just casually glance around and see how we left things."

"Blest if I see why we shouldn't," Phil put in. "While it might be just as well if we didn't,—there's nothing on *my* conscience! The post didn't belong to Tagg, anyway."

It was Paul who felt the least bit nervous with regard to going home past the scene of the night's adventure. He had the tin box and its contents buttoned under his coat. Perhaps he had some notion that Tagg would rush out and

take them from him. Certain it is, in any event, his mind was not disturbed in quite the same way as was Phil's.

Home by the longer road the boys went, for Dave drove straight ahead by that course while the others were talking. They passed the Tagg house at normal speed, but dared do no more than glance at the spot under the pines where the cannon-shaped post had been.

No microscope would be necessary to show that the earth had been disturbed. There could be little probability that the removal of the post had gone undiscovered. The chances were, indeed, that the first member of the Tagg household who passed the spot that morning must have noticed the fresh earth scattered about,—must have quickly found the meaning of it.

Midway between the Beaman place and Mr. Tagg's uninviting dwelling the boys made another discovery. Sam Carew and his friend Kalie were seated on the rail fence, apparently just idling away the time. But why had they come so far only for this? Were they but on

the way to the Tagg farm or had they been there? If the latter were true, where else had they been?

While there could be no answer to these questions, one thing entirely apparent was that it would be well to leave some one in charge at the old farmhouse while these two meddlers remained in the neighborhood. If they were mean enough to throw stones, what might they not be tempted to do, if given continued opportunities by the absence of every member of the Auto Boys' party?

Carew and his friend apparently took no notice of the car or its occupants as the machine drew near. The Auto Boys should have taken no more notice of them. None did so excepting Jones. Unfortunately, he just could not refrain.

"Understand he ain't pitching for Wilton any more," he sang out cheerfully, as if speaking only to the two on the front seats. Of course it was a silly thing to do, though it caused a smile, too. Bright Eyes, seeing only

the joke and not the real meaning of it, laughed aloud.

“Guess he won’t soon laugh the other way, eh!” bawled Sam Carew harshly, as if he, also, spoke only to his own company.

It was impossible not to see that the Boy was the object of this remark. Did Sam have some information concerning the little chap, which was not known to himself and friends, wondered Phil. It was the second time he had made such a veiled allusion.

“You don’t know what he *meant* by that, do you, Jack?” he asked. “If you do know that he might have something, especially concerning you, in mind, you really better tell us, old man. All the more so if it is something that might cause trouble, for then we would be ready for him, don’t you see?”

Bright Eyes shook his head, but he was visibly worried,—even more so than that day after the ball game when Sam had threatened him.

“Now Jack’s going down in the orchard to

bring some apples, then we'll all have a comfortable talk about getting those papers to Lannington," said Phil, when the Thirty had turned into the grass-grown Beaman drive once more. Promptly the little Chap ran off to do as suggested.

"Hurry around into the front yard. We'll see what report we get from Washington," said Phil quickly.

Under the old locust near the portico the unstamped envelope marked "Official Business" was opened. The letter was short. After the formal salutation came only the statement that the Dead Letter Division had no knowledge or record of any Ninth and One-Half street, save one which was in Floraville. The name of the state was given also, but it was scarcely necessary. The Auto Boys knew of Floraville as well as they knew of Cincinnati, Indianapolis or any large city of their own Middle West. Why,—and just as Billy Worth had said,—Floraville was scarcely farther away than Lan-

nington, itself; it was scarcely more than a day's run in the Thirty.

“And if there was a Ninth and One-Half street anywhere else the post-office people would surely know about it!” declared Phil Way with loud and enthusiastic emphasis.

Bright Eyes came around the corner of the house, his straw hat full of red astrakhans, at the same moment. And bless his fast-beating heart! He tried to look as if he had not heard; tried to appear calm and at ease, though he glanced quickly at Way in a manner at once so pleading and so determined that Phil, at least, knew the youngster *had* heard; and knew that for some reason he was completely upset thereby, much as he pretended to the contrary.

The question whether to go to Lannington in the machine or to send by mail those strangely recovered papers, hidden away by Grandfather Beaman, was still being debated when afternoon came. Curious and anxious as they were to learn the importance and contents of that envelope addressed to Paul's sister, the lads

could make up their minds neither to trusting it in the mails nor yet to bearing the expense of going clear to Lannington and back themselves. Repeatedly they had re-examined all the papers open to inspection. Just what value, if any, these possessed they were unable to determine positively.

"We're just too sleepy to think straight," finally declared Billy, with a prodigious yawn. "Let's not decide it today, anyway."

"That's what I say," chirped Paul. "I'm going to have a good old snooze out in the front yard, right now."

Phil said he wanted to go to Middle Run and Billy and Dave agreed to go with him. No one asked Bright Eyes to go. There was a reason for not doing so. A letter was to be sent at once to "F. & S., 29 Ninth and One-Half street, Floraville," making inquiry as to whether a certain boy had been missed from that town.

The dinner dishes had been washed and put away and the boys were seated on the shady back porch. Phil rose, at last, and moved

wearily toward the car. Being up all night was surely a terrible hardship the next day, he was finding. Slowly Dave and Billy followed him.

"I'll just see that nobody heaves any more dornicks, anyhow," said Paul, signifying his intention of remaining at home. But he arose and listlessly followed the car out to the road. Waving his hand in farewell, he then turned toward the shade of the old pines, the locusts and the maples in the door-yard.

Bright Eyes, Paul noticed, also waved his hand in farewell as Phil and Billy looked back. The youngster was standing by the porch. Jones called to him to come out front, thinking they would both lie down awhile in the soft deep grass.

"Well, mebbe," came the response. "Get I'll look for more applet, pretty loon."

Paying no further heed to the younger lad, Paul stretched himself on the ground. That the Boy would join him presently he had no doubt. That the tin box and its papers he so highly prized were in the slightest danger, there

on the floor in the doorway of the sitting-room, did not for an instant occur to him. He had left them there some time after dinner,—very carelessly, indeed, as he had good reason to remember later.

It was five o'clock when Phil, Billy and Dave came rolling home in the car. The pleasant rush of air and exhilarating sense of motion had dispelled their drowsiness, once the machine was fairly under way—and, thus refreshed, they made a longer trip than at first contemplated. And besides, it wasn't often Spike Marble had a chance to ride in the car. Finding him with an afternoon of liberty, the boys had asked him to pilot them over some new roads, far beyond Middle Run and the creek from which the village took its name.

Paul roused up sleepily as he heard the car return. He noticed with surprise the lengthened shadows and realized that he had slept a long time. Not at all disturbed by this reflection, but, on the contrary, congratulating himself upon having had so comfortable a nap, he

dropped his head to his arm again. No doubt he would have again fallen sound asleep, also, had he been permitted. But now came Phil, saying:

“Come on along to Fifer’s for the milk! Have you been sleeping all *afternoon?*”

Still very drowsy, the young gentleman addressed slowly got upon his feet. Together the two performed the errand. Billy Worth was busy with preparations for supper. Dave was washing the worst of the mud from the car and hurrying to be through before the evening repast should be announced.

So did time pass until the late summer sun was setting. Supper was ready.

“Where’s Jack-a-Dandy?” inquired Phil, looking about.

No one knew. No one had seen him.

“Blamed if *I* know where he went to,” said Paul with more emphasis than grammatical accuracy. “I called him to come out in the doorway and he said he would go after some apples first. I didn’t see him again.”

“Reckon you didn’t see much of anything all afternoon,” put in Phil, in a more caustic tone than one often heard from him.

“I left him and I left those papers—By the jumping jack rabbits! where are those papers? where’s that box, fellows?”

A wave of fear and apprehension almost overwhelming swept through the lad’s frame. Had the others, just to frighten him, hidden that prize on which he was building such grand hopes and expectations? Their own faces—their blank amazement—said no, said it too plainly to be misunderstood.

Minutes of alarm and excitement followed. Wildly the four boys rushed to every part of the door-yard, to the garden and to the orchard. Loudly they called.

There came no answer to their anxious, eager cries. They found no trace of Bright Eyes. They found no trace of the tin box or the valued papers it contained. Where could the Boy be? And were Grandfather Beaman’s records with him?

Long, long after dark the supper, served and ready on the little table in the old sitting-room, was still untasted. Every foot of the Beaman place had been searched and searched again. The kitchen attic, the cellar, all the rooms in the house were gone over. The barn, and its great, damp grain bin of cement-work, its queer boxes and corners,—all were searched high and low.

On the supposition, which for a moment seemed hopeful, that the Boy had wandered away some distance and, being very tired, had fallen asleep but most certainly would awaken and be returning soon, the anxious friends at last tried to eat their evening meal. Nevertheless it was a most melancholy and unhappy effort.

Worn out as they all were by the want of rest and the exciting incidents of the preceding night, their spirits would have been drooping at best. And now the strange disappearance of the Boy, for whose care a large responsibility attached to them, accompanied by the loss of the

papers which might mean so much, placed upon their hearts a weight almost unbearable.

In the dull glimmer of the little kitchen lamp, as they tried to eat and drink, the lads unhappily discussed the circumstances surrounding the little stranger's disappearance; and reluctantly they admitted the unmistakable probability that either he had carried off the tin box or someone else had carried it away and him with it. So many things seemed easily possible,—or even probable!

Might not Sam Carew be somewhere at the bottom of it all? It would have been quite possible for him and Joe Kalie to have carried Bright Eyes off bodily. Might not the boy's absence, then, be simply the fruit of Carew's implied threat that morning?

There was Jonas Tagg, too! He would have had ample opportunity to approach and go all through the house, while Paul was soundly sleeping under the trees. True, he would seem to have no reason for spiriting Little Mystery away, though undeniably he would be keen to

lay hands on Grandfather Beaman's papers, if he knew of their discovery.

Then there was the theory that, having reason to believe his identity was being investigated more closely than he liked, the Boy had simply made off. If this were the case, his leaving would be no more mysterious than was his first coming among them, the friends were forced to agree.

Phil could not but recall the boy's manner when reference had been made to the expected letter from Washington; could not but recall his confusion when he overheard mention of a street which, in all probability, he well knew.

"But, I would—yes, I will yet, give my word that Jack is honest! If he has gone off of his own accord, then somebody else took those papers," Phil Way declared. "Then, again, it might be that, seeing the round box lying there on the floor, he put it away, somewhere, for safe keeping. Then, going over into the cornfield or somewhere he fell asleep, just as we were talking about, a little while ago."

"Or, maybe he put the box and papers in his waist or took them with him somehow, same as Paul carried them this morning, so they'd be safe. He likely knew Jones was sleeping," suggested Billy.

"There's no end of things that might have happened," put in MacLester gloomily.

"Would he have gone to Middle Run, thinking to meet the car and you and ride home?" asked Paul. "He might have done that."

"Maybe he got clear to the Run and, seeing him so tired, Spike Marble made him stay for supper," suggested Billy, a little more hopefully.

"We've got to go to Middle Run just as quick as ever we can," announced Phil suddenly. "Two of us will hurry over there and two stay around here, to hunt some more and to be here if he should—Oh, if he only would come!"

There was a sad trembling in Way's voice and he dashed out of the door like a flash. He lighted both the gas and oil lamps of the car and started the engine.

"Who better go, Phil?" asked Billy in a quiet, sad way, so different from his usual manner, it might have been another person speaking.

"You go, Billy,—you and Dave," Way quickly decided. "Go by one road and back by the other. See Marble and anyone else who might have heard or seen anything of him, and the town marshal will have to be notified, too. Yes, I know it's likely to mean telling about those papers, later on, but no need to talk about them tonight. Away you go then! And say! You better stop and let Fifer's folks know we're still hunting, in case any news should come to them."

In the search of the Beaman premises and the neighborhood the home of Mr. Tagg had been the only one not visited earlier. Telling Paul he was going there and that he would insist on seeing and talking with Sam Carew, Phil hurried away.

Jones could only watch and wait. A lonely forty minutes he had of it, too, ere Way re-

turned. Then the two kept watch together, hopeful and despondent by turns; for no tidings of any kind had Phil obtained from the Tagg household.

Mr. Tagg said he had been in the fields all day, himself, and Dan Kalie was helping with a distant neighbor's threshing. Sam and the younger Kalie said they had been down along the new railroad all afternoon.

The bright lights of the Thirty came into view before a great while. If they brought news, or no news, it would be at least some relief to all be together again, thought Phil, as he and Paul walked to the drive.

"Any word?"

"Nothing about the Boy," answered Billy with what calmness he could. "No one has seen a thing of him. There's other news, though."

"What is it, Billy?" Paul asked. The usual sprightly vigor was gone from his voice entirely.

"Nothing more than that Tagg was at the Run just after noon. He got out a warrant for

the arrest of all five of us for the malicious destruction of property."

"We met Marble coming to tell us about it. Wanted us to know it, so that if we wanted to vamoose, we could," Dave added.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CONVENIENCE OF OWNING AN AUTOMOBILE

It was characteristic of Dave MacLester that, when to the others the outlook was pleasant, he was sure to find some cloud in the sky. But to his credit, be it said, he was not a grumbler or fault finder in time of real trouble. And now when he spoke of the serious news obtained from Marble it was with an air quite calm and unruffled.

“Well! That shows what Tagg is, for one thing!” was Phil’s comment, his voice harsh with indignation. “The old villain! He told me, himself, not a half hour ago that he had been in his fields all day! I s’pose he’s found out somehow that we broke up that post! Wonder how much else he’s found out or suspects?”

“We sent word by Spike that we would consider the arrest the same as made; that all they

had to do was let us know when they wanted us," said Billy. "Did you see Carew?"

Way quickly told the result of his inquiry at Tagg's. Worth and MacLester then reported at length how they had met their good friend Marble hastening along the road to apprise them of the danger threatening. Taking him in the car, they had continued on to the village. But their inquiries there regarding Bright Eyes had been entirely unsuccessful. No one had seen him.

"If it wasn't that he had learned to swim so well, I'd be afraid of his having fallen in the river," reflected Phil aloud, still thinking much more of the unaccountable absence of the youngster than of the warrant in the Middle Run constable's hands. "If we only knew where we might look next!"

Paul Jones had been most unusually quiet, a few muttered words his only comment. Now, however, he offered a suggestion—offered it not in his customary lively, energetic way, but sadly, meekly, wearily: "Maybe we

could get hold of some information just taking this trick of Tagg's as a starting point," said he. "Maybe we could find out from that what sort of a move he's been making."

"It's worth trying," said Way promptly. "We'll go straight to Middle Run and tell the officers we'll consider ourselves under arrest. They won't want to lock us up if we do that, I think. When they arrested George Knight for speeding he did that way and it was all right. Then we can find out just what charge Tagg has made against us, and at what time he was in town."

"Looks a lot to me as if Tagg stopped here at the house on his way home," said Billy. "He found Paul asleep and nobody but Jack around. And what happened then I just hate to think about!" he added, his shoulders drooping as if under a load.

Phil quickly planned the second hurried trip to Middle Run. Billy, Dave and Paul should go. He would remain in and about the old house to receive any word which might be

brought. There was faint hope, also, that the missing lad might return of his own accord.

What a fine thing is an automobile! Never tired, never asking the distance, never asking consideration on account of it being time for rest, or the hour for meals,—such consideration as one would feel he must give a horse, for instance! And the *Thirty* was such a splendid car! Rarely out of order, rarely anything but ready, night or day! The boys often wondered how people ever got along, without the utmost inconvenience and loss of time, before automobiles were manufactured!

Without so much as having stopped the engine, Billy turned the car about and headed again toward the village.

“Good-bye! And hurry!” called Phil. And as the “good-byes” in answer came, he walked slowly, sadly to the house. He was sorry he had not been able to see his way clear to go to Middle Run himself. Especially did he desire this on account of taking action with regard to that warrant for their arrest. There would

have to be some sort of a hearing or a trial, he was aware. Arrangements to meet that ordeal must be made. He scarcely knew what, except that there ought to be a lawyer to help them with their defense. On the other hand, it was imperative that someone remain at that lonely, empty house. He had not had the heart to ask one of the others to do it.

No less earnestly than Phil Way wished he might have gone to the village, did Billy Worth wish the same thing. What to do when the three of them reached there was a puzzle to him. Phil would have directed all such matters easily.

Thus it was that Spike Marble was hunted up. Perhaps he would know the proper steps to take in such a situation. Marble did not know very much about the subject. However, he did have some intelligence of absorbing interest. He had a talk with Lon Barlow, the constable, and learned a great deal as to the nature of Mr. Tagg's complaint.

The latter had not refrained from telling of the evidence he claimed to have against the boys

and who his witnesses were. Constable Barlow might not have repeated this information to the Auto Boys themselves, but he did not hesitate about telling it to disinterested parties. Perhaps it isn't too much to say that he keenly relished doing so.

The little town was in quite a fever over the news. Naturally the young visitors had from the first attracted considerable notice, besides having made many friends and acquaintances during their frequent visits. Naturally, too, the intelligence regarding them spread fast. Mr. Barlow had frequent opportunities to tell his story. And he told it all, again and again, with a care for details, a precision as to the exact allegations, and a generally judicial air quite befitting his official position, undoubtedly.

Spike Marble re-told to the three boys the substance of all the constable had said but he did it much more briefly. Jonas Tagg had come to the village soon after noon. He tied his old, white horse in front of 'Squire Widden's little office and went in. He told the justice of the

peace he wanted some boys "took up" for destroying property. He gave the names of all but one of them—the youngest. This was later written in the warrant as "John Doe," as the custom is.

The substance of the farmer's charge was that an ornamental stone or cement post had been taken from in front of his premises and broken to bits. His evidence against the Auto Boys was the fact that the broken pieces of the post were found back of the woodshed at the empty house where they were spending their vacation.

He had noticed the absence of the post during the morning. Later two boys staying with him, Sam Carew and Joe Kalie, by name, had visited the Beaman place at his request, and had found the remnants.

Mr. Tagg stated that he would have known his youthful neighbors took the post, anyway, because they were very destructive and very prying and curious,—minding everybody's business but their own. He wanted them punished

and, by all means, sent away from the neighborhood.

Although it was getting late Billy, Dave and Paul decided to present themselves before 'Squire Widden at once. They wanted to tell him the post did not belong to Mr. Tagg. They even believed that if they told him all their side of the story, the justice of the peace might dismiss the charge.

"No, I reckon we better hear your account of it at the right time and place, which ain't here and ain't now," said the 'Squire, a little later, quickly blasting the fond hope mentioned.

He leaned far back in his old rocking chair at his home, for there the lads had found him. He had removed his shoes and his feet, encased in blue and white cotton socks, rested on another chair before him. The newspaper he was reading by the light of a large kerosene lamp on a table covered with a red cloth had fallen to his lap. He seemed anxious to take the paper again. His manner, while not unkind, showed little disposition to give his young

callers any sympathy, as they stood grouped just inside the open door of the comfortable, but by no means luxurious, living-room of his modest dwelling.

'Squire Widden was an elderly man. He appeared well fed and well contented with his lot in life. A little more of dignity and a great deal more of care as to his personal appearance would have made of him quite a fine, old country gentleman. He stroked his gray mustache and peered uneasily over his glasses at the three boys as they waited.

"But what can we do? We aren't going to be locked up, are we?" asked Billy, in dismay.

"Oh, I reckon there's no need of that," said the justice slowly. "Constable Barlow says you sent word you considered the arrest the same as made. 'In that case,' I says to him, 'have 'em in here for a hearing tomorrow morning.' So if he hain't notified you, I'll do it for him."

"What time?" the boys inquired.

"Oh, most any time. If I ain't in my office,

I'll be across at the store or in the garden patch right back of the house. Most any time 'fore noon."

"We want time to get a lawyer here from Lannington," said Billy Worth, with sudden determination.

"O-o-h!" and 'Squire Widden straightened up in his chair. "Oh!" he said again, but in a less surprised way. "You want a lawyer, do you?"

The three boys said they did, and asked if that wasn't the custom.

"Oh, sometimes 'tis, and sometimes 'tain't," said Justice Widden thoughtfully. He was pondering on how his little office would be crowded by the curious if the accused youths had a lawyer come all the way from Lannington to defend them.

"Tell you what you'll have to do, then," the 'Squire went on, after some reflection. "Come around tomorrow morning, the whole caboodle of you,—'John Doe,' and all,—and we'll hear your plea, which will be 'not guilty,' I take it.

Then we will set the hearing for the next day, which will be,—be—wait a minute!”

Justice Widden adjusted his glasses to inspect a small calendar hanging just above the table with the red cloth. “Which will be Wednesday,—Wednesday at ten o’clock,” he continued presently. “But if you’re going to get a lawyer from Lannington, you’ll have to telegraph, an’ telegraftin’ costs money. And he can’t get here till Wednesday, you know.”

“We will have to telegraph or use the long distance ’phone,” Billy replied, and thanking the really kind old gentleman, the boys hurried away.

At the railroad station it was found that, by leaving Lannington the next evening, one could make connections to arrive in Middle Run the morning following.

“I’m going to telephone,” said Billy Worth decisively. “I’m going to telephone home and my father can tell all your folks. It’s too serious business to keep to ourselves. Who knows what Tagg may testify to, and have Sam Carew

and both those Kalies to back him up? Even if we tell what Dan Kalie said about Tagg stealing that post and other things, we don't know how to go about actually proving it!"

In the boys' exhausted, worn and dispirited condition the thought of seeking assistance and counsel from home was a comforting one, well used as they were to shouldering responsibilities. Very soon, therefore, the Middle Run telephone operator was thrown into quite a flurry by being asked to get William Worth's residence, Main 4621, Lannington.

With what surprise William Worth, senior, heard William Worth, junior, report that the Auto Boys had been arrested, may easily be imagined. Being a practical, broad-gauged man, however, he realized that the time to scold or express at length his disapproval was not in a long distance telephone conversation. What he did say was: "Just look here, my lad, if you boys are guilty, own up and pay up. Pay for the damage! Be men!"

"But don't you understand? Don't you hear

me?" Billy fairly shouted, in protest, "we weren't really guilty at all. There are so many reasons why, I can't tell them now. You've got to come, and if you can't come, send somebody else,—Dr. Way, or somebody along with Mr. Dilworth. We've just *got* to have Mr. Dilworth here. Be sure to send him, even if no one else comes along. There's ever so much back of this!"

At last Mr. Worth promised to send Dan Dilworth on the next evening's train. He, himself, agreed to go together with Dr. Way, and Mr. MacLester and John Wilby,—at least with any of them who believed it necessary to make the trip.

"That's fine, Pop! I've got something more to tell you, but—"

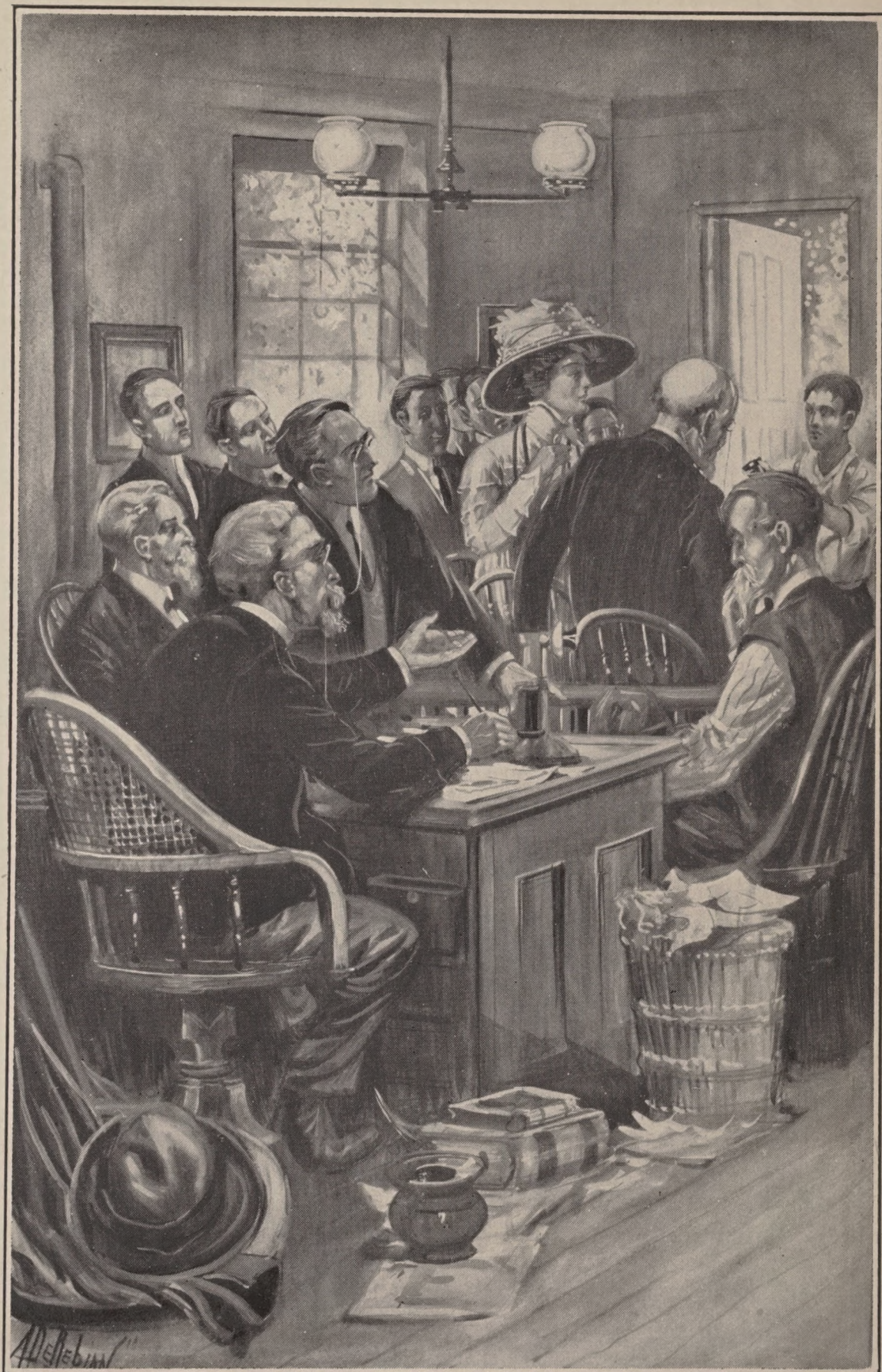
But at this juncture Billy's mother took his father's place at the other end of the line and the two were still talking when the operator "cut in" to say, "Three minutes are up." So as the important things had been told, Mrs. Worth said "good-bye" and Billy said, "Good-

night, mother," and felt better than at any time since noon of that day, at least.

Those of you who read "The Auto Boys" will recall the old-fashioned, smooth-shaven, large and ruddy Daniel Dilworth, the lawyer, who was their friend. Gruff and blunt in his speech as he surely was, he nevertheless had a warm place in his heart for the four chums.

There could be no doubt but he would come to Middle Run immediately. He might say in pretty plain English what he thought of the carrying off of hitching posts or other property, but he would stand by his friends to the end if he believed they had an honest defense. Otherwise, like Billy's father, he would most certainly advise them to settle the damage and never be guilty of such conduct again.

In fact, Dave, Billy and Paul talked most of the way home about what Mr. Dilworth would probably say to them. They felt quite timid about meeting the gruff old man, but would face that ordeal willingly, they thought, just to see what a spectacle he would make of Jonas



"I guess these are the ones!" came a good, strong, boyish voice suddenly at the door.

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Tagg when the latter took the witness stand.

Now the impression should not be obtained that the boys did not feel the disgrace and humiliation which had come to them. They realized now that they had been entirely wrong in carrying off the post, even if it did not properly belong to Mr. Tagg. They understood now that "two wrongs never made one right" and never will. But they had had upon their minds so much of anxiety over the loss of the tin box and the papers in it, coupled with the disappearance of Bright Eyes, which worried them a great deal more, that the incident of their arrest seemed only a part of a world of trouble and sorrow.

The headlights of the Thirty flashed coldly upon the grim, vacant windows of the farmhouse as the car wheeled into the drive. Only the rays of the lamp through the open door of the sitting-room showed that anyone was there, but very soon Phil came hastening out.

One word—the forlorn tone of his voice as he said, "Hello!" was sufficient indication that

he, at least, had no good news to tell. "I haven't a word yet," he said, as he came near. "Have you?"

Together the boys told of what they had done. Phil was greatly relieved to know that word had been sent home—greatly relieved to know that Dan Dilworth would be sent to Middle Run and that his father or perhaps Mr. Worth, or Mr. MacLester or Mr. Wilby—perhaps all four would accompany him.

But even this encouraging information could take none of the awful, gnawing pain over the loss of Bright Eyes from his heart. Neither could he find in the account of Jonas Tagg's statements and proceedings in the matter of the arrest anything to indicate in what way the Boy had been spirited away, or the papers stolen. He had hoped to discover in this report some ground for belief that Tagg had obtained the papers and that he also knew where Bright Eyes was.

The picture of Sam Carew and the Kalies

having carried Little Mystery off to hold him for a ransom, or for revenge, maybe, had been impressing itself on Phil's fancy as he sat alone on the cheerless porch while Billy and the others were absent. He now told them of this impression. All in all, he was most miserable, and most certainly not without company.

"But we have to get some rest," declared Dave, "and we better do it now, so as to start out at the first streak of daylight to look in some fresh place."

"We can leave a light burning," said Paul, and opened his suitcase to get out his night clothes.

"What duds did Jack have on today?" he asked quickly, suddenly. "Here are those clothes of *mine* he wore, all folded up and put away! How can that be?"

The announcement caused instant excitement. The next second, however, Phil Way grabbed up the lamp and ran to a large, empty room which had been the kitchen.

Protesting with emphasis against being so unceremoniously left in the dark, the others followed.

“Yes sir! That’s what he’s done! He’s taken off Paul’s clothes and put on those rags we found him in,” called Philip Way. As if to make sure he turned over the little box in which, in the beginning, the wretched garments had been placed.

“He’s safe then somewhere, fellows! He’s safe somewhere, anyhow! But why did he want to leave us?”

The note of relief and pain combined in Way’s tone was decidedly pronounced.

CHAPTER XXII

THE GREATER ANXIETY OF JONAS TAGG

While it appeared certain that Little Mystery had taken off the clothes furnished him from Paul's outfit and, resuming his own tattered garments, had gone away of his own accord, what prompted him to do so? And whither had he gone?

"Well, we're so glad to know he wasn't kidnapped or anything of that kind, I think we can all go to bed," said Phil. "And when it comes to the box and the papers, I'm not ready to say yet that he took them, much as it looks that way."

All the boys felt keenly the loss of the records which might be so valuable; but considering now that Bright Eyes could not go so far but he could be overtaken the next day, and the papers recovered, provided he had them, the chums were willing to take the rest they all so

sorely needed. Still even after they crept into bed they could not refrain from speculating upon the Boy's reason for leaving them, and whether he had carried the papers off.

There were two answers to the first question, either of which fitted the circumstances. The lad had been frightened away by Sam Carew's threats or, believing his identity was about to be discovered, he had been, for reasons known to himself, unwilling to remain and face the uncovering of his connections or his history. Perhaps through sudden pique that, without informing him, the Auto Boys had written letters for the purpose of finding out what he declined to tell, he carried off the tin box and records for revenge.

But suppose Bright Eyes had not taken the papers? Again and again Paul asked this question. Strange as it may seem, he was even less inclined than Phil to say the documents were in the Youngster's possession. Perhaps Sam Carew and Joe Kalie knew more than they would care to tell. It was known this pleasant

pair had been at the Beaman place during the morning. It was then that they had discovered the wreckage of the cannon-shaped post. Was it not entirely probable that they were there again in the afternoon?

Tired nature asserted itself and the four friends fell asleep with their problems still unsolved. It would have been a pretty active "ghost," too, which would have disturbed them. Even their plan to rise early, to pursue the search for Little Mystery and Grandfather Beaman's records, went overboard with the wave of complete fatigue that submerged them.

A dip and a short swim in a delightfully clear and inviting river are good at any time. Especially well calculated are they to revive drooping spirits and restore mental and bodily vigor, in the cool of the morning and just following a long, sound sleep.

This discovery, while perhaps not original with the Auto Boys, was made by them when at last they did awake. Indeed it was surprising to note how much more pleasant and hopeful they

felt after the exercise, as contrasted with their despairing thoughts of the night before. Things which had seemed but bare possibilities of good fortune the evening previous became strong probabilities now. The likelihood that Bright Eyes would be found ere night, even if he did not return of his own accord, seemed altogether promising.

By seven o'clock the boys were in the car headed toward Sunfield. They planned to go a number of miles back along the Lannington road. If frequent inquiries brought only the information that the Boy had not been seen, they would return and turn off to Middle Run. There the appointment with Justice Widden must be kept. Afterward they would scour the roads beyond the village. They were confident of getting trace of the runaway.

Going at a twenty-five mile clip, for they were anxious to cover as much ground as possible, the boys passed Jonas Tagg's unattractive residence. They did not see the old fellow, but he saw them, as he looked out of a window of

his tumble-down barn. Mr. Tagg smiled. His plans, he thought, were working splendidly. For, be it known, the most worthy old gentleman imagined the Auto Boys to be running away—running away from the constable and the warrant for their arrest. It was the speed of the car that convinced him of this. It was what he wanted. He very much preferred that, hearing they were to be arrested, his young neighbors would make a quick departure. That was his hope and his expectation when he invoked the law against them.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Tagg had taken pains to arrange that news of his action should be carried to the young men. To this end he had talked freely of the warrant placed in Constable Barlow's hands, so allowing the news to be widely circulated. He would a great deal rather scare the boys away than have to appear in court. He meant to do the latter if necessary, but desired to avoid it. There was likelihood of unpleasant questions being asked.

So for the reasons presented, and possibly

for others as well, Mr. Tagg smiled, as the Thirty whizzed past his home. He was of the opinion, if the whole truth were made known, that it wouldn't be very long, now, until he would give the railroad company the proof of title to the land that corporation desired, and get his money.

Ten miles the Auto Boys traversed in the direction of Lannington. When they reached Grade City, which metropolis consisted of a general store, a stave mill, a church and school house and a dozen dwellings, and were still without a trace of their "Champion Mystery,"—Paul's words—they turned back.

The direct road to Middle Run turned off to the right before the Tagg farm was reached, and this route the boys followed. Had they known the pleasant thoughts Mr. Tagg was enjoying and how they would have been upset had the old fellow seen them returning, they would certainly have been tempted to take the road leading past his establishment.

Reaching Middle Run, the friends left their car near the grocery graced by Spike Marble's presence. The machine always attracted the villagers and to leave it standing in front of 'Squire Widden's place of business would only draw a larger attendance at their hearing.

That there was a sufficient audience without such advertising as would have been afforded by the Thirty standing before the small frame structure where the 'Squire held forth, the boys soon learned. The office was half filled with loiterers there before them. Constable Barlow had simply whispered to his friends, and they in turn notified theirs.

The 'Squire was making a great effort to be occupied with his papers when the boys entered; but he put his various documents away promptly. Indeed it was evident that he was expecting the four youths who now marched soberly up to his desk.

"Oh!" said Mr. Widden. "I had almost forgotten you. One, two,—four,—where's the

other one? Barlow, ain't there five names in that warrant?"

The constable said there were five. 'Squire Widden again counted the youthful figures before him.

"The other is a friend of ours who has gone away. We don't know just where," put in Phil quietly.

'Squire Widden frowned. It would never do, he said.

"You see the little chipmunk up and ran away yesterday, and for no reason whatever," spoke up Paul Jones, briskly. "He went before we ever heard of this business,—not because he wanted to get away from the music."

"He'll have to appear," said Justice Widden with emphasis. Perhaps he did not place much faith in Paul's statement.

"We'll have him in here as soon as we can find him," said Phil.

"You see what *you* can do about finding this young man, Barlow," said the justice of the

peace with some asperity and a glance toward the audience.

The constable said he would do as requested. Moreover, he expressed the opinion that he would do it all in a very complete and comprehensive manner. Like his judicial superior, he seemed inclined to the opinion that the person styled "John Doe," in the warrant, had some very good reason of his own for not putting in an appearance.

"We only hope you *will* find him," said Billy Worth, noting the constable's manner. And then, as it had been understood that nothing would be done today but receive the pleas of "not guilty," 'Squire Widden wrote them down in his record.

He cautioned the boys they would certainly make a mistake in trying to shield the fifth member of their party, then told them they might go without other bond than their own word.

Once more the boys assured the magistrate that nothing would give them greater pleasure than to have "John Doe" with them when they

came again. Hoping truly that they might do so, they hurried away and to the Thirty in waiting.

At their request, Spike Marble wrapped up a liberal supply of boned herring, crackers, cheese, ginger snaps and bananas, and with these provisions to serve for their noonday meal the lads set out once more in the machine. Driving here and there, hoping from hour to hour that at the next house, or at the next hamlet or village, or on the next road, at least, they would find some word, some trace of the missing Bright Eyes, they consumed the long summer afternoon in their fruitless search for the little lad.

“But you can’t tell,—maybe we will be glad he’s gone when we get word from Floraville,” said Billy Worth. “Just suppose, for instance, that we hear from there that he’s crooked. We’ll be tickled to pieces that we got rid of him so easily.”

“Not till we get those papers back!” put in Paul, with emphasis.

“Oh, hush! Hush up! I’m just about ashamed of you!” Phil declared. “Whether we find Jack or don’t find him, he’s a good, square scout, now you take my word for that! And if they write us that he’s not, I just propose that we go to Floraville before vacation ends and unravel the whole mystery; for there is one, and the more so, too, if they say he’s anything but straight.”

No success whatever crowned the search of the roads and rural hamlets to the east, west and north of Middle Run—the Lannington road was south)—though the odometer showed the car to have made more than one hundred miles since morning.

With fifteen miles between them and the old farmhouse the boys turned toward their quarters there shortly before sundown. As they went through the village, a telegram was found at the grocery,—it was addressed in care of Marble—stating that Daniel Dilworth, Mr. Worth, Mr. MacLester, Mr. Wilby and Dr. Way would all reach Middle Run next morning.

This was pleasing news, though unfortunate too—unfortunate because the boys were sorry to feel that, all on their account, the expense and trouble had been considered necessary. Yet the presence of their elders would certainly help their case. And they were confident that, if the means of showing the object of their breaking up the post could be forcefully presented, they would not be found guilty. They could show their action to have been in no way malicious or idly mischievous. They were willing now to admit it might be called a mis-judging of their rights.

That the papers the old post contained would be most important evidence, the lads were well aware. These would prove their contention that they were not wilfully destructive in breaking up the property. Without the papers, however, of course, Mr. Tagg would say, “Fol-de-rol! A pretty fairy tale to tell the court!” and deny their story.

Had they depended upon themselves alone, the four friends would probably have succeeded

in making a good, strong case in their own behalf in Justice Widden's court; but the probabilities are—who knows? In view of all that happened afterward, it was certainly better for all that Dan Dilworth was present to look out for his clients' interests.

With all their troubles, with all the weight upon their minds, the four boys were very glad to turn the car into the drive at the Beaman place. They were glad to eat supper—a rather meager one, though it was,—and glad to get to bed. A brief survey had seemed to show nothing disturbed in their absence, and they donned their night clothes, rightly concluding that Jonas Tagg and his adherents,—Sam Carew and Joe Kalie included,—were content to rest on their oars in anticipation of a great triumph in 'Squire Widden's court next day.

As for Mr. Tagg himself, at this time, his satisfaction in the belief that the Auto Boys had been frightened away was short-lived, after all. At noon came Constable Barlow to notify him that he must appear as the prosecuting wit-

ness, next day at ten o'clock. The additional information that the young defendants had telephoned to Lannington for an attorney caused the old gentleman both uneasiness and indignation.

He would have to get a lawyer to assist him in the prosecution, he decided; but it was like deciding he would have to cut a finger off. It would be hard to imagine anyone so meanly reluctant to part with money as was Jonas Tagg.

To the county seat a dozen miles away Mr. Tagg drove during the afternoon, however, and obtained a lawyer. Just such an attorney as one would expect a man of Tagg's calibre to have, too, did he get.

The name of this choice of his was Riblet. And the first act Mr. Riblet had performed in a decade, which might properly be said to call for public approval, was in wringing five dollars from Mr. Tagg as a retainer. The old fellow yielded the money just about as willingly as a hungry dog would yield a nice, meaty bone.

“But we’ll fix ’em, Tagg! We’ll make Widden drive ’em out of the country if *that’s* what you want, and in a hurry, too!” Mr. Riblet assured his client. He screwed his coarse, bearded face into a horrible grin as he spoke. He had no notion that he could accomplish what he promised; but he had the five-dollar bill in his pocket now and later would charge as large a fee as he believed he could collect. All of which tends to show that talk of honor among thieves and their like is mostly bosh; which, as a matter of fact, it is.

Mr. Tagg went home bemoaning the parting with his five dollars, as might be expected. He promised himself, though, that if Riblet did not secure a conviction and a sentence, which would immediately rid him of his unwelcome neighbors, that learned lawyer would get not a penny more than the retainer advanced, let him charge what he might.

So drooping was Mr. Tagg over the whole matter that he devoutly wished he had never caused the warrant to be issued. He never

would have done so had he seen at the time just one day into the future. He knew more now than he knew then—much more. Yet, he reflected, maybe the arrest was the best thing after all. Or, he thought again, maybe it wasn't.

It was a puzzling question. Perhaps it was to think it all over that the old fellow sat far into the night in the dismal, fireless kitchen of his home. Perhaps it was to think it over further that some time after daybreak, but before anyone was stirring, he hurried away and crept through the lanes down into his woods.

But why should he kindle a fire in the furnace of his sugar house—the very sugar house he had asked his young neighbors to occupy? Why did he hurry out, a few minutes later, closing the rough door behind him carefully, and glancing about feverishly at the creaking of the rusty hinges? Why his haste to be away and why the frightened, sneaking manner with which he went through the woods and the lane to his home again?

CHAPTER XXIII

THE HOUR BEFORE TRAIN TIME

Although they well knew the train from Lannington would not arrive until nine o'clock, and that the trial before 'Squire Widden was still an hour later, the four boys left for Middle Run at seven. In their anxiety and excitement they even had felt time would not possibly permit of their usual morning plunge—scarcely permit of more than a hasty breakfast.

They dressed with more than usual care. Knowing the importance of a neat, clean appearance at any time, but especially so when they would be under scrutiny as they would today, each lad put on his Sunday attire. A quartette of clean, manly, intelligent young fellows they were as they walked up to the village station.

It was still nearly two hours before the train was due, but they dreaded to be late. The auto-

mobile, for the reasons prompting a similar action the day before, had been left in a shed back of the grocery.

It was a beautiful morning, though the heat of the early sun gave promise of becoming uncomfortably warm as the day advanced. As Paul Jones observed, it was a shame—a “measley shame” were the words he used—that just at a time when the car would be so comfortable they must contemplate being penned up in the stuffy, little building which comprised Justice Widden’s office.

One consolation, however, was that the boys saw no reason to believe the trial would last long. Somehow their own sense of right and justice would not let them believe, either, that the decision would be against them. Yet they realized it might be. A great deal must depend on Justice Widden himself. As to this, it was certain that if Mr. Dilworth discovered the ‘Squire’s sympathies to be noticeably with Mr. Tagg, he would demand a trial by jury.

Mr. Ambler, proprietor of the grocery, other-

wise dominated by Mr. Spike Marble, had suggested this thought. He was decidedly friendly to the Auto Boys.

Not only with regard to the trial but also concerning the stolen papers were the four friends anxious to talk with Mr. Dilworth and those from home. They hoped to find some means of going about the recovery of those records. Perhaps some search of the Tagg place could be made. Perhaps Sam Carew and his friend Kalie could in some manner be put under oath or in some other stern fashion be made to tell what they knew of them. Perhaps some positive plan for finding Bright Eyes could be developed.

But all these were matters for later consideration. Just now the absolutely unaccountable manner in which time dragged on was of itself a problem and a hardship. Even the morning paper which had arrived earlier, helped but little. Who could read base ball news with any interest or satisfaction at such a time, anyway?

It was eight o'clock and only an hour to wait

remained. Then something happened; something happened which occupied that hour so fully the boys wondered to find time to have flown so rapidly.

“Say! Somebody down to the hotel wants you quick!” exclaimed the general handy man from the village hostelry, rushing into the station breathlessly. He was a youth of eighteen or so, and if he had any other name than “Tiddledewinks” the Auto Boys had not heard it. He was stable man, messenger, bell-boy, baggage-man and a great many other factors rolled into one for the Middle Run House.

“Ye’re wanted right off! Don’t ye hear me? Lady sent me on the run! Her and a man was just goin’ to drive out where you’re stayin’, when I told her I seen ye go by a bit ago. Her and the man just got in on the train south, this mornin’!”

And having imparted this information in breathless haste Tiddledewinks called, “Come on, quick, now!” in a way that brooked no discussion. Then away he rushed again. Truly

it is remarkable how much a tip of twenty-five cents will do in some places, compared with how little it does in some others.

Not a little mystified the Auto Boys, marching by twos, reached the hotel. Tiddledewinks, motioning frantically to them to hurry, waited on the veranda and led them to the close, sparsely furnished room which by someone's bright imagination had been named the parlor.

As the boys entered there arose to meet them a strikingly beautiful woman. She was tall and dark, her manner so queenly that the imperious arch of her brows, the pride in her delicately curved lips, could scarcely add to the commanding atmosphere seeming to surround her.

No need to ask who this lovely lady could be. No need to inquire where, many times before, the like of those magnificent eyes, the soft curve of cheeks, the proud lines of nose and chin and arching brows had been seen. There could be no mistaking them. And when she said, which she did at once, "I am Roger Comfort Falwin's mother," she told nothing the four boys had not

immediately known, save only the name of their missing friend.

The lady's voice was low, but full and sweet, though its note of sadness was very noticeable, too. She was dressed, as if for traveling, in a suit of some rich brown material; but it was her expression and her manner rather than her handsome face and rich attire which so plainly indicated high station and gentility.

"I am Roger Comfort Falwin's mother," the lady said. "Do you know something of my boy? Did you not write to Floraville regarding him?"

And having spoken thus far with tears in her voice only, the mother of Little Mystery restrained the tears in her eyes no longer. Quickly motioning the boys to be seated, she also sat down, then cried as if her heart were breaking.

At this juncture a gentleman who had risen and stood beside the lady when first the boys entered, and who, evidently, was Roger Comfort Falwin's father, put his arm about her and begged her to compose herself.

Never was Phil Way so utterly unable to use his tongue. Never before had Paul Jones been so completely upset that he was too timid to speak a word. Billy Worth it was who managed to respond. Quickly he saw that news of the young stranger's recent disappearance must be broken gently:

"Yes'm; Roger's been staying with us at a farm over by the river. We didn't know his name or where he lived. Maybe the letter we wrote to Ninth and One-Half street was sent to you. We didn't know what his name was, you see."

"He is with you now? At least at your home?" the gentleman asked quickly, while he still held his arm about the mother and whispered to her to be calm,—assuring her the boy was found,—assuring her she would see him soon.

"Oh, he's been with us a couple of weeks," answered Billy, as cheerily as he could; but his heart was not in his manner and the lady instantly noticed.

“Where is he now? Where is Roger now? Tell me—tell me he isn’t far from here!” she pleaded, and even in the midst of tears and sobs her bearing marked her sweet refinement.

“Well, you see,—perhaps you better tell how we happened to pick him up, Phil,” young Mr. Worth answered, with some confusion, but with a significant look toward Way.

Phil found his voice, with this appeal, and with all eyes turned toward him, he began by telling of the first appearance of Bright Eyes as a member of the outing party. He did not mention the incident of the license tag but hurried on to the manner in which the toothbrush had been found and the efforts made to learn the boy’s identity.

In silence and with deepest interest the father and mother of the Boy listened to Way’s recital; heard him tell how bright and cheerful the little chap was at times, and how down-cast he would often be; heard such of the facts of the strange experiences accompanying the outing at the old farmhouse as concerned the youngster,

excepting only the probability that, in going away, he had taken with him certain valuable papers.

“But we are certain he cannot be far—sure all of us can now find him. He was scared, you see, that’s all!” Phil concluded hopefully, his eyes gleaming with new life.

“Why, yes, my dear, now you *must* have *courage*,” said Mr. Falwin to Mrs. Falwin. “We’re on the right track, at last! We’ll find him! Even before evening, maybe, we shall have Roger right in our arms and sound as a dollar!”

Mrs. Falwin was greatly comforted and greatly encouraged; but she was greatly disappointed, too, when she learned that by reason of a very pressing matter in the court of Justice Widden, the nature of which was quickly explained, the Auto Boys would not be able to join immediately in further search for her son. Yet her eyes were quite dry now and her manner quite composed. She thanked the lads most gratefully, and as she again solicited their aid

in the further search for Bright Eyes, she added:

“And although you have been too polite to ask when and why Roger ran away, I am sure you will wish to know and I do wish to tell you—how your letter came as the first ray of sunshine in many and many a long, bleak day and night while we searched everywhere and found not one hopeful trace.

“I am sure you will understand how Roger left us,—understand how almost heart-broken his mother has been, when I tell you about it all, for you say you liked him. No one could help liking Roger, though. He is such a good boy and it is all his unhappy mother's fault that he would not tell you so much as his name. Oh! My poor, little sweetheart, how could I have spoken so?”

Mrs. Falwin cried softly for a few seconds, holding her handkerchief to her eyes while her husband comforted her as before. When she again recovered her composure she told the four friends how simple, yet how tragic, a little

incident had caused Bright Eyes to turn his steps away from home, more injured in spirit, undoubtedly, than he could possibly have been by the severest of bodily punishment.

It had been more than three weeks ago, that, looking from the window of their home in Floraville one afternoon, Mrs. Falwin saw Roger quarreling with another boy. At the same moment a sister of the neighbor lad came up, urging them to stop, and trying to separate them when they did not. Before Mrs. Falwin could speak a fist shot out and the blow so stunned the little girl she fell.

Filled with indignation that a child of hers should do so vile a thing, Mrs. Falwin, who by this time had reached the scene, commanded Roger to follow her into the house. Never yet had he disobeyed, and when she had seated herself he stood before her, ready to hear the sentence.

"I am heartily ashamed of you! You disgrace yourself, your parents and the name you bear!" the mother said.

"He called me 'comfy!' " the youngster answered.

"But you—you, almost a grown-up boy! You who ought to be a gentleman! To strike a *girl!*"

"I didn't do it."

"Gentlemen never contradict their elders,—certainly not ladies!" the mother coldly answered. "What shall I expect next? You make me ashamed that anyone should know your name. You make me ashamed that anyone should know you are my son or your father's son or even that you live in our home. Thoroughly ashamed! And to think people must know you are my son! I would far rather have no boy!"

The flash of pride and spirit in Roger's eyes, the setting firm of his young lips were no new thing. When his mother saw them and saw him turn and walk quickly away, she believed he would come, as often he had done before, when his heat of passion passed and ask forgiveness. She sat a long time sadly musing, grieved

and pained that the pride of her heart should have so far forgotten her teachings as to raise a hand against one of the gentler sex.

A caller came, taking attention to other matters for a time. But when the guest was gone and the mother made inquiry of the maid if Roger had been seen, the answer was that he had not. The evening meal was served and still no boy appeared. Mr. Falwin set out to search and long afterward returned, having found no trace whatever.

Thoroughly alarmed, both parents and their friends traversed the city and its surroundings the whole night through. They made anxious inquiry at every possible place where the boy might be. It was all with no success.

Several days of feverish anxiety and unrest followed. At last came word that a boy answering to Roger's description had been seen among a band of gypsies who, some time earlier, had been encamped in the city's outskirts. Still other days of alternate despair and hope passed by while the gypsy band was being traced and

at last discovered, a great many miles distant.

But again came disappointment. The boy who had asked if he could not join them,—so they declared—had suddenly left them one day as they camped at the roadside. They had searched a long time for him, but meeting with no success, journeyed on.

The wretched band of wanderers was suspected of having concealed the boy to demand a ransom or for some other purpose. More time was lost by the half-crazed parents in entreating them to give them back their son at any price; and when this failed, in invoking the law against them.

Then came dreary days when no word or clue of any kind which might be followed relieved the dreadful suspense. At last came the letter of the Auto Boys to the F. & S. concern of Ninth and One-Half street, and the immediate placing of that communication in the hands of Mr. and Mrs. Falwin. In haste they found the location of Middle Run and so had come by the first train to that isolated little village.

“He never but once, I think, so much as let us guess that he had any home anywhere. It was when he had a sudden fall one day and spoke before he thought,” said Phil. “And we all of us learned never to ask about such things, for he was ready to leave us any time we did. We knew he was a good boy, and we can find him again, I’m sure. He’ll be *glad!*”

And his mother would be glad, too, and his father no less so. And both the more because of something Mrs. Falwin now added to her story. With a mother’s pride she told, though it made her cry more than before to do so, how she had found the next day after Roger’s disappearance that not he, as she had supposed, but the neighbor boy had struck the latter’s sister. The girl told this and her brother confirmed it.

“Well, it just shows the trouble a girl can make,” put in Paul Jones, very seriously, anxious to say something comforting.

Paul had been quiet a long time; but even when Phil shook his head at him, with deep

significance, he did not realize he might better have remained so.

“And one reason Jack—we’ve called him that because we had no other name, Mrs. Falwin. One reason he was frightened when Sam Carew spoke to him so was because Carew called him ‘Jolly Roger.’ He thought his name had been found out, I think,” said Billy Worth.

A wheel-barrow rattled along the roughly paved brick sidewalk. “That train’s in, fellows! There’s Uncle Sid and the mail,” observed Dave MacLester with some anxiety.

At these words referred to the wheel-barrow, on which was a pile of mail sacks, and to the stoop-shouldered old gentleman who trundled that conveyance in the service of the great United States government, all present looked out.

Even as they did so, the boys beheld the great frame of Dan Dilworth, the lawyer, accompanied by Messrs. Worth, Wilby, MacLester and Dr. Way just at the hotel steps. Mr. Dilworth was mopping his bright, ruddy face with an exceedingly large pocket handkerchief, as usual.

CHAPTER XXIV

A DAY OF INCIDENTS IN MIDDLE RUN

The cramped quarters combining 'Squire Widden's court room and office were crowded. Every available seat was occupied and wedged around the wall were as many villagers as could possibly find space or press their way in through the mass of old men, young men and boys who packed the entrance and surged outside the doorway.

Justice Widden peremptorily ordered Constable Barlow to clear passage and keep open the little aisle between the two lots of nondescript chairs and benches occupied by spectators. The constable rather bashfully, but with evident relish, too, asserted his authority. A murmur of excitement followed.

Piloted by Mr. Dilworth's great frame—his heavy step fairly shook the little building—the four young defendants entered. They marched

quietly forward, followed by Mr. and Mrs. Falwin, John Wilby and the fathers of Phil, Billy and Dave, to the railing enclosing 'Squire Widden's desk, the space for counsel, witnesses and, when occasion required, the jury.

There were not enough chairs for all, but the 'Squire himself soon remedied this difficulty by shooing away a lot of boys from their seats in the forefront. The youngsters yielded their chairs gracefully enough, and Justice Widden lifted them over the low railing; but every boy took great care to retain his place, though left standing. They did not intend their two hours' wait should go for nothing.

Mr. Dilworth shook hands cordially with Justice Widden, as did also the other members of the party, the four boys excepted. Then the lawyer for the defense shook hands rather coldly with Mr. Riblet, counsel for the prosecution, and cast a searching look toward Jonas Tagg, with whom he did not shake hands.

Mr. Tagg was noticeably nervous. He had honored the occasion by replacing his rubber

boots with others of leather. In place of his usual faded blue overalls, he wore green corduroy trousers. They were pulled down over his boot-tops but, being a trifle short, stopped four or five inches above his ankles. His checkered gingham shirt and a vest or waistcoat of antique seersucker completed his attire, for he wore no coat. As has been remarked earlier, the day was warm.

As Mr. Tagg folded and unfolded his arms, hitched his chair forward, hitched his chair back, and manifested other symptoms of being ill at ease, he cast frequent glances toward Justice Widden. Sam Carew and Joe Kalie, who sat with him, were more occupied with watching the crowd back of them. Now and again they nodded knowingly toward youngsters of their acquaintance, as much as to say, "Just you wait and see what happens."

The Auto Boys and their friends were naturally the objects of the crowd's chief interest. There was much nudging and much inquiring concerning Mr. and Mrs. Falwin. Both being

entire strangers in the village, there was a vast extent of conjecture as to their identity. Some had them an aunt and uncle of one or more of the four friends; some thought otherwise, and all made very positive declarations in support of their various views. Of course none of them was entirely right; but what matter?

Mr. Dilworth had thought it best to have the parents of the missing "John Doe" of the warrant present in case that young gentleman's identity and absence should call for testimony. All in all, indeed, the old lawyer was disposed to look grave over a number of features of the charges against his friends. They had committed an unlawful act. That he could not deny. By their own testimony they might appear to justify themselves in some degree. If the missing papers could be used to incriminate Jonas Tagg to some extent, the outcome could hardly be unfavorable.

As matters stood, however, Mr. Dilworth would commit himself as to the probable decision neither one way nor another. The most

he did say was his remark in answer to a question from Mrs. Falwin: "No, I shall object to any adjournment for noon, if there is a likelihood of the case being finished in reasonable time."

The stir of expectancy in the little room passed to perfect quiet as, without formality, 'Squire Widden announced the court opened, and called the case of the State vs. Wm. Worth, Philip Way, David MacLester, Paul Jones and Roger Comfort Falwin.

It was at Mr. Falwin's own request that this name had been substituted for "John Doe." He wanted no one to believe his son was trying to evade punishment or deny participation in the act charged against his companions.

A wave of excitement passed through the court room as many of the spectators recognized the name of the boy about whose disappearance there had been a great deal in the city newspapers nearly a month earlier. Then someone whispered that the charge against the Auto Boys had been changed to that of stealing

the youngster away. Like the puffing of powder the rumor passed to every part of the room.

“Well, maybe Middle Run ain’t on the map some today,” observed the near-assistant post-master-general, as he heard the report. “But I don’t believe that talk, though. I don’t believe those boys ever deserved to be arrested, no-how.”

Straining ears, eyes and necks to hear and to see, the crowd became quiet instantly, as the lawyers for the prosecution and for the defense briefly stated to the court their respective sides of the case to be heard.

Mr. Tagg was called to the witness stand. He said he had tried to be friendly to the boys who, for a time, had become his neighbors. They, on the other hand, he declared, had been mischievous, impudent and even abusive. The hitching post which they carried away and broke up, he said, he valued very highly. He had no doubt that simple malice and wickedness prompted the removal and destruction of the property.

Then Daniel Dilworth, Esq., in the cross-examination of the witness gave Mr. Tagg the most uncomfortable ten minutes of his whole life. The latter stuck to his original statements, for the most part, but contradicted himself a score of times when asked, in different ways, concerning the real ownership of the cement post.

“As a matter of fact, you more than half imagined the Beaman place belonged to you, didn't you?” growled Mr. Dilworth in that gruffly honest, deep voice of his.

The crowd tittered and Mr. Tagg hung his head sheepishly. He was allowed to leave the stand without answering.

Sam Carew and Joe Kalie were examined. Their testimony was merely that they had found the fragments of the post concealed back of the woodshed at the Beaman place. They had no doubt, each in turn declared, that malice prompted the destruction of the property. They knew the Auto Boys disliked Mr. Tagg, they said, and had been anxious to injure him.

The testimony of these two model youths was made by Mr. Dilworth to appear very silly indeed when he cross-examined them. Their story, that they had originally gone to the Beaman house searching for the stone post, was shown to be false. Both witnesses, under the keen questioning of Mr. Dilworth, admitted that they only chanced to find the broken fragments while rummaging about the premises in the absence of the occupants. They had gone back later to identify the pieces of the cement work more fully when Mr. Tagg discovered the post to be missing from its accustomed place in his front yard.

Still another point of much value to the Auto Boys, developed in the cross-examination of Carew, was that Mr. Tagg had gone to the Beaman place to see the remnants of the post during the afternoon of the day in question. As Sam made this admission the person named was far from pleased; but catching Justice Widden's eye, he winked in a leering sort of way, as if to say, "Don't pay any attention to such

talk." Justice Widden frowned and looked away.

Mr. Dilworth saw what took place and, quite to the surprise of all who knew him, actually smiled. But he was thinking his own thought, was Mr. Dilworth—deep and knowing student of men and of minds, Dan Dilworth.

Before the taking of testimony for the defense began, Mr. Riblet appealed to the court to have all the chief witnesses for that side excluded from the room, and called one at a time. His motion was allowed, of course, as is often customary. Still he went through a great many violent gestures and spoke in a very loud voice for some time afterward. Perhaps he wanted to impress upon Jonas Tagg the fact of his doing a great deal to earn his fee.

In charge of Constable Barlow, Phil, Billy and Dave were taken through a side door to wait in the shade of an old evergreen in 'Squire Widden's dooryard while Paul testified.

Mr. Dilworth brought out at once in Jones' examination the fact of the boys having discov-

ered the meaning of the queer figures burned on Grandfather Beaman's wooden leg. The interest of the crowd in this testimony was marked. It was still greater, however, when Paul Jones went on to tell of the search for the stone post. This he did, but he told nothing of the capture of Dan Kalie in the attic. Mr. Dilworth had preferred not to enter into that feature of the case unless it should be found necessary. The point he did have Paul make strong was that it was for the purpose of recovering the lost papers, known to be there, that the post was removed.

For his own part Paul would have told quite cheerfully all that had been learned from the "ghost" Mr. Tagg had sent to the Beaman place, and it was not to save either Kalie or Jonas Tagg, himself, that Mr. Dilworth did not permit it. He had other things in mind and he had no wish to let the most excellent Tagg know how much he knew, and how much he suspected—at least not yet.

"Where are the papers you found, at the

present time?" Mr. Dilworth asked as the examination proceeded.

Paul answered that they had been taken away from the Beaman place but he did not know by whom. "I think—" he started to say.

"Never mind what you think. It is not evidence," said Mr. Dilworth. Then presently Paul was turned over to Mr. Riblet for cross-examination.

Mr. Tagg's legal representative undertook at once to ridicule the whole story of any papers whatever having been found in the old post. He did not, however, materially shake the boy's testimony on this point or others. Still—

"Where *are* those papers you say were found?" he demanded for the sixth or seventh time.

"I don't know," was the answer.

"No, I'll warrant you, you don't;" were the comments of Mr. Riblet.

He grinned like a jack o' lantern; perhaps with really less expression than one cleverly made. Mr. Tagg, on the other hand, was more

fidgety than ever. Devoutly he wished he were some place else.

In turn Phil Way, Billy Worth and Dave MacLester were called to the stand. Their testimony supported Paul's at every point. As each was excused he was allowed to remain, and all were present, therefore, when John Wilby was called to confirm the evidence submitted regarding strange characters having been burned on the wooden leg.

"We will produce this artificial limb for the court's examination," said Mr. Dilworth, "if its existence or the significance of the marks it bears are disputed. If they are admitted, some time will be saved, as, unfortunately, the exhibit was not at hand when the case was called."

Mr. Riblet sneeringly said it was too warm a day to go into fairy tales.

"Maybe it ain't reg'lar, but the court will go so far as to say that this court saw the departed Benjamin Beaman's wooden leg and saw the figures burned into it, long enough ago," put in Justice Widden. "This court, then, will

admit their existence without seein' 'em further, an' save time thereby."

Mr. Dilworth nodded his approval of the court's remarks. Mr. Riblet put on an expression of doubt and contempt—chiefly for Mr. Tagg's benefit, unquestionably.

As to the general character of the Auto Boys, and their behavior in the neighborhood, several witnesses were called for a few words each. Mr. Fifer, Spike Marble and the near-assistant post-master-general were among them. Without exception they spoke highly of the defendants. Their testimony was made even stronger by the sneering comments of Mr. Riblet in the cross-examinations.

The arguments of the lawyers were all that remained to be heard. The stuffy little court room was exceedingly close and warm and the audience by this time was densely packed in the limited space. It would appear that half of Middle Run's population was present. News of the interesting nature of the testimony had spread rapidly.

Justice Widden ordered a passage cleared to the door again, to admit air, and Mr. Riblet began his remarks. In but a minute or two he succeeded in working himself into a great heat. With extremely loud talk, terrific swinging of his arms and banging of his fists upon the table before him, he was making a great impression on Mr. Tagg, at least.

In extreme violence of language Mr. Riblet denounced the Auto Boys for coming into this "peaceful, law-abiding community," as he said, "upsetting every law of decency and order and stone posts and other people's property, generally." Mr. Tagg seemed really to enjoy it very much.

"Don't tell me," thundered Mr. Riblet with a terrific whack upon the table, "don't tell me that it wasn't cussedness and— and—maliciousness that was at the bottom of this—this—outrage that has been perpetrated! Papers? After papers were they? After some papers in a stone post! Bah! It's enough to disgust a thinking man! If they were after papers—If

they *were* after papers, where are those papers now? I want to know! Why don't they *produce* that wooden leg? Why don't they produce them there papers? Where *are* they?"

"I guess these are the ones!" came a good, strong, boyish voice suddenly at the doorway, and there came Bright Eyes,—Little Mystery—Roger Comfort Falwin,—marching quickly down the aisle, holding up the round tin box, as if to hand it over to the extremely astonished Mr. Riblet himself.

"These are the papers that were—" the dusty and dirty but still attractive boy spoke up again, but before he could say more his mother had seized him in her arms.

Instantly all was confusion. Instantly Middle Run broke into cheers. The approving yells on that day of victory over the Wilton base ball team were, by comparison, weak and spiritless. Almost everybody joined in, including the Auto Boys, of course. Dan Dilworth's big handkerchief was never used more vigorously.

Never had there been before and most prob-

ably never will there be again such another scene in that office of the village magistrate in Middle Run. Regardless of the railing, regardless of chairs and furniture, which were pushed over and tramped underfoot, the excited audience soon surged around the lost boy, so suddenly appearing in his true identity.

Everybody was in a perfect fever of delight and satisfaction, apparently—everybody but Mr. Tagg, Mr. Riblet and Carew and Kalie. Poor Sam, being accidentally knocked off his chair, would certainly have been injured under the feet of the crowd but for Mr. Dilworth. The latter, seeing his predicament, seized him by the collar and pulled the young gentleman to his feet with more speed than gentleness.

Fully ten minutes passed before Lawyer Riblet succeeded in getting any attention whatever to his violent demands for order. He had become quite savage and very red in the face—surely Mr. Tagg must have seen that he gave good measure for his money—when at last 'Squire Widden called for quiet. The justice

himself had shaken hands with Mr. Falwin three or four times in his excitement, for he left his bench and mingled freely among the crowd, before he resumed his seat.

“Since this young person is a defendant in the case, I’ll move that your Honor hear his testimony before the arguments of counsel are proceeded with further,” said Mr. Dilworth, when some degree of order had been restored.

Mr. Riblet paused long enough in an excited, whispered conversation with Mr. Tagg to object to the motion.

Justice Widden started to speak, and Mr. Riblet to listen. Mr. Tagg, however, wildly clutching his lawyer’s collar, drew that gentleman’s head fiercely toward him to whisper something further. It was more than the already severely irritated Mr. Riblet could bear.

“Let go my neck, you old fool! Want to strangle me? You leave this case to me. *You’re* all right.”

Whatever it was that Mr. Tagg may have desired to say, he certainly was greatly per-

turbed. And whether he was, or was not, "all right," it is just possible that he was better able to judge, at the moment, than was his learned counsel. For Mr. Tagg had not told his lawyer everything. It would have been very unlike him.

However, Justice Widden's ruling was that the testimony of "John Doe," alias Roger Comfort Falwin, should be heard.

Still clothed in the rags in which he had gone away from the old farmhouse, Bright Eyes took the stand. In a round, clear voice he told the story of the breaking up of the cannon-shaped post, and the purpose thereof.

But was it Little Mystery speaking? The Auto Boys and those of Middle Run who knew him would have doubted their ears.

Was it Roger Comfort Falwin speaking? His mother, sitting near, her eyes still moist, restrained her emotions only by greatest effort. His father's face was a picture of surprise and sadness mingled. For never again were they to hear the sweetly childish changing of *S* or *TH*

to *T* or *L*, in their son's words. He had gone away a young boy. He had come back a sturdy youth.

Excitement had worked this change in Roger for a fleeting moment, once before, as will be remembered, and as the boys told his mother afterward; but now the change was permanent. Not once in his testimony, or later, did he revert to his lisping speech.

"These papers—Tell in your own way where you got them and how you came here with them," said Mr. Dilworth, continuing the examination. His usually gruff manner was quite soft and pleasant now.

One could have heard a pin fall in the farthest corner of the little room. By premonition the deeply interested audience seemed to know how important the statement requested would be. Sam Carew's reluctant admission that Mr. Tagg had been at the Beaman place the day the papers disappeared, was still fresh in mind.

Then Roger told how, having decided to leave the Auto Boys, into whose company he had first

come quite by chance, he remembered having heard Mr. Tagg make frequent mention of his sugar house. In a general way he knew its location and, slipping away, he went down along the river, into the woods, and so came upon the small building. There were berries in abundance for food and he remained all night and the day following in the woods. The second night, still undecided where to go, he slept in the sugar house.

When morning came he was lying awake, in a crate that had held molasses cans, Roger stated, when he heard someone enter. Somewhat startled, he raised himself up, and through a large crevice plainly saw Mr. Tagg. Keeping quiet, he watched.

Mr. Tagg kindled a fire in the arch or furnace—Roger called it the “fire-place.” When the blaze had gained a good start, he took something from an inner pocket and putting it in the fire, soon went slowly out and closed the door.

Confident he recognized the object thus left to the flames, the boy waited only until Mr.

Tagg was a few rods away, then quickly investigated. In another moment he had snatched the tin box and its contents from the fire. For a long time following, he watched lest the farmer return and find him, then at last he crept out and followed the river to the Beaman place.

To his disappointment Roger found no one at the old farmhouse. He waited a great while, though in constant fear that Mr. Tagg might come at any moment and find him and the box of papers. His hope was that the Auto Boys would soon return. At last he inquired of a stranger, driving past the house, whether he had seen the lads in their car. The passerby told him of the trial taking place and, being thus informed, the little lad set out for Middle Run.

Thus he concluded his testimony, and thus had Bright Eyes reached the court room just as Mr. Riblet began his argument. He heard the missing papers mentioned, and then heard them loudly called for. Down the aisle he

could see his friends. He realized that the records in the tin box were needed by them and he stepped forward.

"It would hardly seem that arguments in this case could be anything but superfluous," said Mr. Dilworth, after Mr. Riblet, making an instant failure of an effort to destroy the strength of Roger's statements, had abandoned the attempt.

"'Bout the way it appears to this court," Justice Widden answered dryly.

Mr. Riblet said nothing.

'Squire Widden added: "The defendants are discharged."

"While everybody's here, and it is all quite convenient, I'll ask for the arrest of the prosecuting witness, in the case just concluded, on charge of larceny," said Mr. Dilworth. "If your Honor will have a warrant prepared it may as well be served at once."

"Plenty of time. Mr. Tagg won't run away, I guess," answered Justice Widden, peering

over his glasses. "And the fact is, it's past dinner time. This court is adjourned."

With what triumph Bright Eyes and the Auto Boys were escorted to the village hotel might be made the subject of an entire chapter. And the dingy dining-room of that diminutive hostelry surely never contained a more pleasant party than they and their elders, Mr. Dilworth included, composed.

There it was, that, acting on behalf of Paul Jones and his sister and John Wilby, Mr. Dilworth looked over the records Grandfather Beaman had hidden away. There was no doubt, he declared, but the papers would prove Mr. Beaman to have been the owner of the land Jonas Tagg had claimed. He was confident the contents of the envelope addressed to Paul's sister, which he reserved to be opened by her, included the actual deed to the property, never put on the public records.

Mr. Tagg, it was clear, knew the deed had been given but had never been recorded. Yet

he feared the paper might still be in existence, and was anxious to find and destroy it.

That Mr. Dilworth was right may be stated at once. A deed to the land south of the old farmhouse was in the envelope bearing the name, "Emma Jones."

It is pleasant to know and to tell of good fortune that has come to one's friends. It is pleasant to ponder upon the inestimable happiness of Paul Jones that, indirectly he and his chums were the means of placing his sister, her husband and himself in comfortable circumstances, for Paul shared in the large sum realized by the sale of the land the railroad company desired. His portion of his grandfather's estate was placed in John Wilby's hands, as his guardian, to provide him a thorough education. And he still thinks, by the way, that he will some day be the engineer of railway bridges and other great structures.

Rejoicing in the recovery of their boy, Mr. and Mrs. Falwin were more grateful than words could express to the four friends who had cared

for him. The tinge of sadness they must have felt to hear Roger speak, not in his accustomed, odd lisping manner, but in a way which made him appear much older, would wear itself away in time. How sweet it was just to hear his voice again, no matter how he spoke! Yet it was pitiful, as well, when at table he told his story.

He had gone directly to the gypsy camp when he left home, he said. He was sure his mother considered that he had disgraced her and the name he bore beyond amends. He was oh, so very sorry, but somewhat angry, too. He felt that to conceal his name and his home from all would be the only way of saving his parents from shame.

One thing Roger did not tell or even understand was the part his own injured pride had played in his thoughts and his actions. He was unwilling to be considered a disgrace to his mother; he wished to save her; but he was also unwilling to bear unjust reproaches, or to yield to the better counsels of his heart.

It was not until time and suffering had soft-

ened his foolish pride that he began to think of home and then he still feared he would not be welcome; that he had no right to reveal to anyone his name.

It was in the neighborhood of that first noon-day camp of the Auto Boys that Roger slipped away from the gypsies. They had taken his clothing and all his belongings, save only a tooth brush. Their harsh cruelty, not only to himself but to each other, particularly the unkind treatment of the women by the men, the boy also resented. He resolved to leave them and in the night crept into the cornfield. For two days he concealed himself there.

Very likely the gypsies spent little time in search for the boy. They had taken all he possessed that they valued. To keep him might cause them trouble.

The automobile first interested Roger because of the means it offered of quickly leaving the gypsies behind. He feared then, and for some time afterward, that they would try to find and compel him to return. Often they had said to

him, "Once a gypsy, always a gypsy," and he was ashamed, as well as afraid, to tell the Auto Boys or anyone of his connection with the wandering band.

It was with genuine regret that, after the entire party had spent the remainder of the day at the old farmhouse, the Auto Boys parted with Bright Eyes at the station. He in turn was both glad and sorry to go home. Certainly he was delighted to be with those whose son he was and to be told that he was not a disgrace to them, and to be in good, clean clothes again, too. But right cheerily did he say: "I want to be with the Auto Boys for their outing next year, the whole time, if they'll let me."

And they answered, "*Will* we?"

Mr. Dilworth, John Wilby, Dr. Way, Mr. Worth and Mr. MacLester returned to Lannington on the evening train. It had been decided that, unless he made further trouble, no criminal action should be brought against Jonas Tagg. A civil suit to recover for the use of the land he had wrongfully held so long would be

brought instead, and this was subsequently done.

Rich as he was, so far as money alone can make riches, Mr. Tagg was nearly heart-broken when obliged to make the settlement mentioned. The amount paid over to the Beaman estate was a yearly rental on the land he had falsely claimed, for the entire time he had held the property, with compound interest added.

In Middle Run they are still smiling over the failure of the miserly old fellow's schemes. Even the capture of Dan Kalie in the attic of the old farmhouse had become known, due to his own habit of talking too much, and many a laugh has resulted.

Dan's brother Joe and Sam Carew were kept so steadily at work while "visiting" at Mr. Tagg's that they put in a claim for wages. Mr. Tagg, on the other hand, declared they weren't worth their keep and they have never received a penny. Mr. Riblet, the lawyer, keeps them company in this, for he is still trying to collect

the fee for which he exerted himself so tremendously that day in 'Squire Widden's court.

In the evening of the day following the trial, the Auto Boys returned to the old farmhouse, determined to carry out the original plans for their outing. Thus far their time had certainly been occupied quite differently than they originally intended. But from now on all went well. Until the sixth of September they remained at the Beaman place, enjoying their car, enjoying the river, the fields and woods, and all the wholesome, sound delights that nature offers.

Here it was too, and seated on the same front door-steps where they had talked of so many other things before, that new plans began to shape themselves—plans which later took definite form, and in the end assumed proportions that make a story in themselves—the next of this series,—“The Auto Boys' Quest.”

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